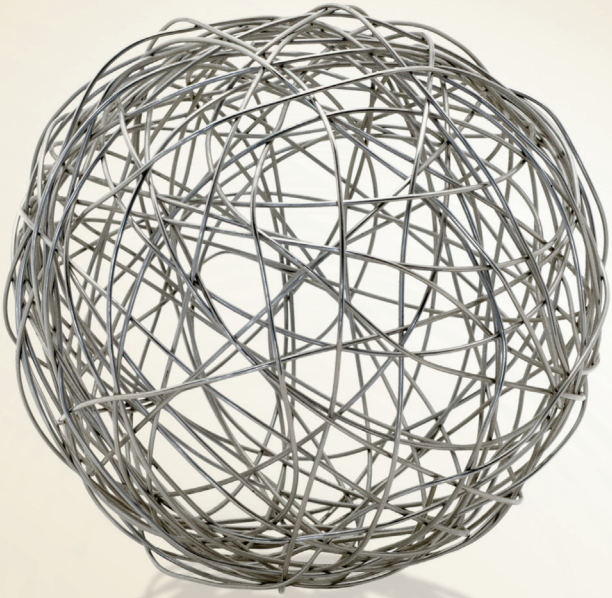

NADINE GORDIMER

WEAVING TOGETHER FICTION, WOMEN AND POLITICS

DENISE BRAHIMI

Translated by Vanessa Everson and Cara Shapiro

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Preamble

'N'y a-t-il pas un autre endroit où nous pourrions nous rencontrer?'
'Is there nowhere else we can meet?'[1]

There is something essentially satisfactory about symmetry. In 1995, the French Institute of South Africa (IFAS) opened its doors in Newtown, the cultural hub of Johannesburg. Some five years later, diversifying from its regular publication of the *Newtown Zebra*, it published a work of literary criticism in co-operation with Karthala Editions. Of course, this venture fell within the avowed mission of the Institute to foster French scholarship in South and southern Africa. The publication was the work of the prolific French academic, Denise Brahimi. Professor at Paris VII and visiting professor at the Winthrop-King Institute for Contemporary French and Francophone Studies of Florida State University, she is the author of books and innumerable academic articles. Written in French, the study dealt with a quintessentially South African topic – the writings of Nadine Gordimer. Just five years after that, this time in the Johannesburg suburb of Parkview, the French Information Centre, Dibuka, dependent, as is IFAS, on the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, took the decision to fund the publication of the English translation of Brahimi's work. The reason behind this decision was the desire to increase access to research done in French on a South African topic.

Denise Brahimi's choice of subject matter is easily explained. Along with Breyten Breytenbach, André Brink and J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer was already well known in France as one of the 'White Quartet'. The award in 1991 of the Nobel Prize for Literature had cemented her literary

reputation. Indeed, the majority of the Nobel laureate's writings were available in French translation. However, as Brahimi is at pains to point out in her analysis of Gordimer, academic scholarship in French on this first South African Nobel laureate extended little beyond Liliane Louvel's 1994 study.[2] With her passionate interest in women's writing and cultural diversity,[3] Brahimi found in Gordimer's creative output ideal subject matter.

Given the abundance of scholarship written in English on Gordimer, what is the particular interest of a French study[4] of the South African author, a study which, furthermore, does not go beyond her 1998 novel, *The House Gun*? After all, since then the joint winner of the 1974 Booker Prize[5] has added to her list of publications a series of reminiscences (*Living in Hope and History*), two novels (*The Pickup*[6] and *Get a Life*[7]), as well as the collection of short stories *Loot and other stories*.[8] The fact that the founder member of the Congress of South African Writers continues to interrogate the human condition with her customary incisiveness would suggest the importance of insightful scholarship on all aspects of her creative evolution and role as a writer – insights that Brahimi is well able to provide. Furthermore, like many of her contemporaries, Brahimi reflects in her analyses the conjuncture of academic rigour, sensitivity towards political commitment and the urge for freedom from intellectual constraints. Hence she adopts a novel and thought-provoking perspective. The aim of this translation is, then, to afford Anglophone readers access to a fresh approach. Add to this the notion expressed by Bernard Magnier in his press release 'Cultural Diversity: a Francophone struggle',[9] that, within an African context, the very act of translation serves to combat linguistic divisions and to nourish diversity simply by having increased potential readership.

With a certain (at times naïve) immediacy born of relative unfamiliarity with the South African situation, Denise Brahimi launches fearlessly into an analysis of Gordimer's writings. Anticipating by several years Ronald Suresh Roberts in his controversial biography *No Cold Kitchen*,[10] Brahimi sets Gordimer apart as an activist who places her commitment to art above politics and for whom it 'would quite simply have been unthinkable

to have thought otherwise'. Brahimi sees Gordimer as a true partisan of the liberation struggle who cannot be criticised for not having supported full franchise for the black majority of the South African population, a reproach that has been levelled at some of her liberal counterparts. By eschewing all historical pedantry, Brahimi is able to set Gordimer's writings against the unfolding drama of South African politics. Whilst acknowledging that, at certain stages of her life, there are strong parallels between Gordimer's personal life and her fictional creation, Brahimi respects her subject's right to privacy, asserting furthermore that to adopt a purely biographical approach would be to limit the true scope of Gordimer's writing.

In a text that makes explicit reference to Gordimer's avowed literary loves and influences (several of which are French[11]), Brahimi peppers her analysis with existentialist allusions to Camus and Sartre. She lauds Gordimer's resolve to resist the obvious: those popular topics which easily elicit warm, 'fuzzy' responses. Here we are introduced to an artist who moves between the external socio-political context and the private world of her characters. In a study that distils as the essence of Gordimer's writing the existence of opposing forces – man v. woman, black v. white[12] – the reader is shown an author who moves between life and art, external and imagined realities, the personal and the political. Brahimi's interrogation of the coexistence of these opposites is all the more apposite because the texts that she analyses coincide with an important period: 1980 to 1995. During this time, the concepts of 'womanism', 'African feminism', 'critical third-world feminism', 'black feminism' and 'post-colonial feminism' were being debated and defined, and were significant for consolidating African feminist scholarship and for focusing on the nexus of gender, power and race.

Brahimi shows us that for Gordimer the struggle is never far away, as her characters are pulled and shaped by intricate political forces. And yet they emerge as complex, flesh-and-blood individuals who, like Rosa or Vera for example, wrestle with their own personal dilemmas. The analysis ends with *The House Gun*[13] but ably anticipates the direction that the South African author was to take. The inference is that we are dealing

here with works of the imagination that go beyond the confines of a moment in history, however momentous that history may be, and that here is an author who is able to illumine human existence at some deeper level, much like Camus or Sartre. Overarching all this, there is the construct of the existential imperative of the writer's mission – to continue writing. It is in this light, then, that the present work is a reflection of intercontinental scholarship and collaboration, of translation as a remedy for linguistic division and a means of encouraging cultural diversity. This is surely a place where we can all meet.

Vanessa Everson
University of Cape Town

Contents

Preface

Denise Brahimi has indeed grasped the main features of Nadine Gordimer's literary talent. For whilst it is true that the novels and short stories of the 1991 Nobel Prize laureate in Literature deal with tragedy in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, and that death features strongly in them, they are never melodramatic. The skill of this white South African novelist lies in combining understatement and shrewd irony with an acute sense of observation, which means that she can recreate the ambiance of a dinner party as well as the climate of an era, the distinctive features of a milieu or the countryside beyond.

Brahimi has also perceived the tension arising from the 'coexistence of opposites' that permeates Gordimer's works. This tension is two-fold, existing both between man and woman within the marital couple, and between blacks and whites within South African society. Gordimer handles these two issues with subtlety, avoiding any oversimplification. Brahimi thus observes that, in *The Conservationist*, Mehring's ex-wife, a 'left-wing intellectual', is not particularly endearing, just as Mehring, who is pathetically full of himself and his white superiority over the blacks, is worth more than his ideas might suggest. In *My Son's Story* it is the women (in the roles of wife and daughter) who are cast in a good light whilst the husband pales into insignificance and the son is reduced to the role of helpless onlooker.

Brahimi is right to highlight the importance of the female characters in the South African's short stories and novels, even though Gordimer can hardly be called a feminist. This is the case for women as diverse as Rosa in *Burger's Daughter*, who wishes to break away from her father's activism, for Hillela, the flighty seductress in *A Sport of Nature*, whose crowning, amorous achievement is to become the wife of a black African President, or Vera, the imperturbable activist working for black property rights in *None to Accompany Me*.

Given that sexual relations and marriage between whites and non-whites (blacks, coloureds and Indians) were punishable by imprisonment during the apartheid era, the forbidden 'mixed couple' provided ideal subject matter for South African writers. Gordimer did, of course, tackle this issue, notably in *Occasion for Loving* (one of the few Gordimer works not translated into French) and in *A Sport of Nature*. Yet, as Brahimi points out, Gordimer has avoided the clichés of an overexploited genre. For example, in *A Guest of Honour*, which is set in a newly independent southern African state, Bray, the white liberal who supports the black cause, has a white mistress rather than a black one, as might perhaps have been expected. Moreover, in *My Son's Story*, the white mistress of the coloured political leader is not particularly physically attractive.

Although Gordimer does include many black men and women as fictional characters, she focuses on describing the distinctive milieu of a handful of whites who are opposed to the apartheid regime. This is certainly the milieu that Gordimer knows best; after all, she was part of it before openly joining the African National Congress shortly after Nelson Mandela's release in 1990. Brahimi stresses the thirst for recognition that the white liberals depicted in Gordimer's novels expect from the blacks. It is an expectation (narcissistic perhaps) that is not always met. In *July's People*, an African servant, July, rescues a white couple from the chaos of black rioting, and in *The House Gun* a white couple puts their son's life in the hands of a black lawyer. According to Brahimi, the dominant role given to the servant and the lawyer in these novels alludes to the revenge of the blacks after centuries of humiliation and oppression. Published in 1981, *July's People* sounds a clear warning to the

white minority in power. As for *The House Gun*, Brahimi maintains that it is not merely a 'detective story'. Rather, it describes a liberated, democratic and multiracial South Africa which is also riddled with violence and vulnerable to crime at the very time when the new South African authorities are debating the death penalty, later to be abolished. Here, Gordimer also paints an unusual portrait of a depressive, unfaithful young woman, Natalie, who incites her lover to commit an impulsive crime of passion. In the end, however, Natalie's reckless lasciviousness makes an impression on the court and her lover escapes the death penalty. Thus the 'life-ethic', symbolised by the birth of a newborn baby of uncertain paternity, can triumph over the 'death wish'.

Brahimi also notes that there is no such thing as a taboo subject for Gordimer, who deals with, amongst other things, homosexuality. Take, for example, Vera's lesbian daughter in *None to Accompany Me*, not to mention the (occasional) homosexuality of the murderous son in *The House Gun*. Once again, the South African novelist does not pass any sort of value judgement: she notes, she describes, and above all, imagines while remaining convinced that her fiction is more 'real' than reality. Moreover, this is the task that Gordimer assigns to writers, whose duty it is to be witnesses to their era. French culture plays a strong role in this South African writer's works; amongst Gordimer's literary role-models are Balzac and Proust, and the critic Roland Barthes.

In more than sixty years of writing – her work was first published during her late adolescence – Gordimer has in fact recorded the history of her country. And despite the fact that several of her novels – *Burger's Daughter*, amongst others – have been the object of censorship, she has remained in South Africa.

By retracing Gordimer's literary journey, Brahimi is also narrating the history of the anti-apartheid movement. This is an example of committed literature which is in no way self-indulgent, but which is testimony to unfailing insightfulness.

Claude Wauthier
Journalist and translator[1]

Introduction

'The question of for whom do we write nevertheless plagues the writer, a tin can attached to the tail of every work published [. . .].
In this context, Camus dealt with the question best. He said that he liked individuals who take sides more than literatures that do.'[1]

Nadine Gordimer is fortunately not unknown in the Francophone world; along with certain other white South Africans, her name is connected with the now victorious anti-apartheid struggle. It is the least one might expect. Yet it would be a great pity to acknowledge this without taking into account the originality of her work. This originality should not be understood as just a collection of techniques but, on the contrary, as comprising manner and tone.

It has become commonplace to wonder if the triumph of the struggle with which she is associated does not perhaps call into question the urgency and even the point of her task as a writer; all the more so since the 1991 Nobel Prize for Literature could be seen as the apogee of her literary career. Since the end of apartheid, however, Gordimer has published two novels, which are evidently as fecund and fascinating as ever.[2] How then did she manage this, and why? The moment has come to tackle what, for want of a better word, can be called her 'journey' and to draw out the complexity of her progression. This is no easy task given that the corpus of work in question is extensive and yet restrained, both candid and discreet.

Proust's and Balzac's Way

In Nadine Gordimer's case, what does it mean to go back to the beginning, or thereabouts? This does not entail going back to the start of her life, for that would be contrary to her own views on the author and writing. If we take the famous debate between Proust and St Beuve,[3] then Gordimer's stance is clearly Proustian. That is to say that a writer is to be understood by the projection of himself found in his writing, rather than by biographical investigation. Although in her first novel, *The Lying Days*, published in 1953, Gordimer examined her own life fairly closely, she renounced this style of writing immediately afterwards with her next novel, *A World of Strangers*, and has not attempted it again since. Gordimer does occasionally speak of herself in her essays, but this is always for historical clarification or when speaking of others. She never elaborates upon the events of her private life, but affirms, on the contrary, her strong desire to protect it at any price.

There are some references to Gordimer's family in her body of fiction; she mentions her mother in 'The Termitary', a short story which forms part of the collection *A Soldier's Embrace* (1980), and refers to her father in another short story, 'My Father Leaves Home', in the collection *Jump and Other Stories* (1991). 'The Termitary' deals with family life during Gordimer's childhood, when her mother reigned over the household while complaining bitterly about her husband's inability to help her in this. In 'My Father Leaves Home', Gordimer recounts how her Russian father was sent by his parents (as a thirteen-year-old boy) from Central Europe to South Africa, where he lived until his death. Yet the desire to stick closely to a past which affects her personally makes no difference to Gordimer's customary methodology. This consists both in imagining what she does not know, based on the information that she has, and in picking out the symbolic or general meaning of even the most miniscule facts. Yet the aim of these multifaceted short stories is certainly not to provide researchers with autobiographical material.

Gordimer's remarkable discretion regarding her personal life goes far beyond any psychological propensity for modesty. Her conception of the novel is Balzacian even before it is Proustian: she must render intelligible

an entire society through its race, class and gender relations using, of course, her own experience – how could this not be the case? And yet, Gordimer does so much more than this.

A meaningful place to begin is necessarily the start of her writing, allowing, of course, for some measure of hindsight and freedom of choice. Gordimer is one of those authors who began to write very early on, from the age of thirteen we are told,[4] and who has not stopped since. Of the twelve novels that she wrote between 1953 and 1998, there are three which have not yet been translated into French, which is clearly frustrating for Francophone readers. Unfortunately, by no means all of her short stories and essays have been translated into French either. However, and bearing in mind that we have only nine novels, three collections of short stories and two collections of essays, the irony (even the paradox) of using any restrictive formula in such a situation must be abundantly clear. A considerable amount of Gordimer's work is available to the Francophone reader, and it is almost inconceivable that it is met with respectful acknowledgement rather than passionate interest.

In actual fact, it seems that French readers are hindered in their approach to Gordimer's writings by a certain number of preconceived but irrelevant ideas (as we will show in this discussion). It is likely that the methods of French university teaching (even though Gordimer is well worthy of them) are not the best adapted to analysis of the corpus of her work. This is why it is not appropriate to follow the development of her novelistic writing from its infancy to its most recent form penned in the late 1990s. Such an approach would run the risk of keeping Gordimer's writing within a circle of initiated readers, whereas she has never played the part of an avant-garde writer destined to remain the reserve of the knowledgeable few.

Judging by the common reaction of those unfamiliar with Gordimer's works, they seem to be suffering the repercussions of what was for a certain time an overexposure to so-called committed literature, or worse still, to use an older term, 'didactic literature'. To define Gordimer's fiction in these terms would be absurd. Gordimer's novels do not adhere to the sequence of historical events, but are situated, to varying degrees,

on their margins, and so cannot be seen as a march towards a victory, born of sacrifices made by black and white activists hunted down by the armed hatred of apartheid leaders.

The other common perception of Gordimer concerns her alleged indifference or lack of feeling that prevents the reader from sharing fully in the characters' emotions and their struggle. Firstly, this second grievance somewhat contradicts the first. If Gordimer were in fact writing 'struggle literature', she would not hesitate to tug at the reader's heartstrings over the plight of her heroes, many of whom pay for their views with prison, and even death. It is clearly through arousing emotion that a literary work is likely to gain partisans to a cause. In effect, her apparent indifference results from a completely different tone altogether, a particular type of irony or 'self-irony', because it is often applied to (primarily female) left-wing, anti-apartheid activists. Obviously, it is impossible to refer to this tone outside of the context of her novels, but one can already glimpse an indication of the unique relationship between the novelist and what she describes. It is a relationship that could be labelled more an ongoing, open questioning than the affirmation of any truth.

In actual fact, it seems that, for Gordimer, the necessity of the anti-apartheid struggle is self-evident, and therefore requires no explanation. It is only after this presupposition is out of the way that she can begin to explore the implication for her characters (be they male or female, black or white). In this sense, one cannot even say that Gordimer writes 'struggle literature', although she herself was, and still is, an activist. It is not activism which nourishes her literature because, strictly speaking, there is no bridge between the two; each domain has its own autonomy, demands and particular logic. Furthermore, the theoretical component of her writing contains numerous reflections of a Sartre-like nature (a writer well-known to Gordimer), which deal with the position of the 'committed writer' over the past 50 years or so. The reader who is interested in such issues should consult these essays since in them Gordimer explains her point of view more convincingly than any literary critic could.

Weaving Fiction

In line with the Proustian rationale to which Gordimer subscribes, we shall seek to draw out of her novels and short stories a few main threads, chosen for their continuity and solidity. In the first place, we will observe these as highpoints of her fiction seen from a chronological perspective, then we shall return to some of Gordimer's constant preoccupations, either to examine them in isolation or to see how they are intertwined. Finally, we shall discover what slips through the mesh of this web, thus giving her work the power to subvert any ideas or conventions by which it might be defined.

As one might have expected from a corpus of literature (rather than politics), there are at least two threads which emerge from the web and impose themselves by their continuity, irrespective of the extreme simplification needed to tease them out. This clearly means that Gordimer is not merely preoccupied (a ridiculously weak word) by black/white relations, but that she also has the ability to extend these to male/female relationships. The geographical and historical South African context in which Gordimer examines black/white relations means that these have taken on the extremely negative form of apartheid. Yet this negativity is still a type of relationship, not to mention its transgressive consequences. As for male/female relationships, these fall within Gordimer's novelistic portrayal of the couple and family through different characters and their no less varied needs.

Gordimer is a novelist of great resourcefulness who employs extremely varied methods to achieve her purpose. Nevertheless, she can be viewed as a classical writer, in that she readily employs traditional narrative techniques (in simple parlance, comparable to those used in the nineteenth century), and also falls within the tradition of the novelistic genre that is founded upon the interdependence of characters and the world they inhabit. More precisely, in the situations that she describes, personal life is always somehow mixed with the collective (and thus political) life, even if the character intends to stay well out of such events, as is the case in *The Conservationist* (1974). On each occasion, the way in which Gordimer intertwines these two threads is different, and characteristic

of the life she is describing by means of realist techniques. This is all the more evident since there are no less than four variables in her descriptions: men and women, blacks and whites.

The 'intertwining' of four variables and two opposing groups needs clarification, if this corpus of writing is not to be reduced to the all too familiar. Even though Gordimer is well-acquainted with the work of the postcolonial writer Frantz Fanon, and does occasionally draw inspiration from it (more, it seems, from *The Wretched of The Earth*[5] than from *Black Skin, White Masks*[6]), she never chooses to portray so-called mixed or interracial couples. From this, one can conclude that mixed couples were for a long time, and perhaps still are, rare, even clandestine, in South Africa. This theme is found occasionally in her short stories, for example in 'Town and Country Lovers' (*A Soldier's Embrace)* and is dealt with in a few of her novels, in *Occasion For Loving* (1963) or *My Son's Story* (1990) for instance, and with great prudence in *None To Accompany Me* (1994). Whilst it is true that the 'mixed couple' may almost be considered the main subject of *A Sport of Nature* (1987), the book, as its title indicates, actually deals with a completely atypical character, Hillela. The protagonist is a white woman who behaves in every respect like a black woman, and could, or perhaps should, be one; in the course of numerous relationships (conjugal or other) with black men, she never once gives the impression of being part of a 'mixed couple'.

If on this occasion Gordimer devotes her novel to a woman who is a 'sport of nature' (that is, an exception) it is because in all her other novels she conforms to the great novelistic tradition set out by the father of the genre, Lukàcs. In this way, the novel is a genre which endeavours to portray individuals who are typical and, as such, exemplary. The so-called mixed couple represents a very specific case, and leads the novelist towards specifics, whereas she desires as broad and general a portrayal as possible. The cases that Gordimer examines are all variations on a theme, each specific yet representative of the general.

Gordimer's interest is humanistic and distanced from the anecdotal, the folkloric, and from everything that attracts yet disgusts the reader. *A Guest of Honour*, which was published in 1970, is a good example of

the way in which Gordimer breaks away from the clichés of interracial love. The protagonist of the novel is an Englishman who returns to an African country at the time of its independence, thus separating from his wife after more than twenty years of marriage. In Africa, some time later, he has an affair with a much younger woman. She is not, however, a black woman, but white, even though in the protagonist's youth he did have a meaningful relationship with a black woman. Indirectly, Gordimer emphasises the unexpected nature of this story, as (almost) everyone would have better understood if this new woman had been African. This is only one indication that, even though Gordimer's novels do not describe anything out of the ordinary, they are rarely predictable.

The portrayal of racial and sexual differences gives rise to episodes that are biased in a particular direction. Although we have ruled out searching for (even remote) autobiographical traces in Gordimer's work, we should mention that her fictional viewpoints are often (though not exclusively) directed *from* white society *towards* black society, and *from* the female *towards* the male. This type of dominance does not, however, stop several other perspectives from being adopted, even within the space of the same novel. Moreover, the perspective is not linked to a first-person narrative whereby the 'I' is a white woman. Gordimer's narrative technique becomes increasingly complex as she advances in her work, and occasionally the diversity of viewpoints is considerable. Yet each time that the attitudes or judgements in a novel are those of a white woman (and regardless of whether Gordimer is dealing with fact or emotion), it is difficult not to believe that the novelist is expressing bias, or making a point about her own personal progress for those who know how to listen. Once again, Gordimer's special aptitude for diversity and her taste for alternating her mode of creation must be acknowledged: a hero is followed by a heroine, for example, *The Conservationist* (1974) is followed by *Burger's Daughter* (1979), and after diving into the female mind with Vera Stark in *None to Accompany Me* (1994), comes the objective description of the state of a society in *The House Gun* (1998).

One has the impression that, early on in her writing, Gordimer advanced step by step in order to deal separately with each of her pre-

occupations. *A World of Strangers* (1958) obviously centres on a man's description of African society, and notably the encounter that this white man has with a black man who becomes his friend. It is apartheid society which is the main subject of the novel, and gender differences play merely a secondary role. With *The Late Bourgeois World* in 1966, on the other hand, Gordimer begins her exploration of what will become her other main theme: the white woman, her way of perceiving male behaviour and character differences, her solitude and responsibilities that cannot be shared with husband or lover.

By using these two examples to observe the way in which Gordimer deals with each thread separately, one can highlight a feature which is common to all of her novels (and which is also a great help when approaching them): the novelist's insightful and meaningful choice of title. *A World of Strangers* emphasises the main feature of the South African situation (the separation between blacks and whites) not only as an objective fact but also as a subjective emotion experienced mutually by both groups. *The Late Bourgeois World* focuses on the absence of both the marital couple as the foundation of society and the protection of the wife guaranteed by patriarchy (the cornerstones of white society for almost two hundred years).

It was another fifteen years before Gordimer intertwined these two threads, the white family on the one hand, and black/white relations on the other, in *July's People* (1981). This is all the more exemplary since it is an experimental novel and Gordimer chooses her 'ingredients' in a systematic manner. The circumstances that she devises put a white family (instead of a single individual, as in *A World of Strangers*) in direct, intimate and unexpected contact with a representative sample of black society. This situation brings out the differences that exist both within the white marital couple and between parents and offspring. The radical transformation of the situation creates a magnifying effect, thus rendering visible what was hitherto unseen.

Yet even before the skilful intertwining of *July's People*,[7] the novelist tests her mettle with a series of variations on her favourite themes. Her method first involves distancing herself to some other place. This 'else-

where' can be practically all the African countries which, since the start of the 1960s, have become independent, and which, to a certain extent, constitute a natural testing ground from which to draw empirical conclusions. Of course, this takes into account the fact that South Africa is, in every respect, a different country, worse perhaps because nowhere else has there been an equivalent to apartheid, but better also because, as the black ascent to power was for long only a dot on the horizon, there has been time to prepare for it.

In *A Guest of Honour* (1970) Gordimer tries to take stock of the serious difficulties which surfaced in nearly all African states shortly after independence. In *The Conservationist*, she attempts, but not from an activist perspective, to locate the greatest obstacles to transformation in South Africa. Gordimer thus takes stock of two very different types of problems, rather like the reflective process undertaken by Lenin after the failure of the 1905 Russian Revolution. However, the distinctive nature of the novel, as Gordimer conceives it, gives rise to a corpus that can hardly be called didactic and which is certainly not conclusive. It is impossible to extract anything but a series of observations, questions and problems from her novels. Yet together the whole is rich and textured: politics, the couple, sexuality, love, commitment and, above all, the disruptive effect of death on thought processes. Bray, the 'guest of honour' in the novel of the same name, dies at the end of the book; although he is not consciously prepared, his death occurs after a journey which (for both himself and the reader) foreshadows his inevitable end. For Mehring, the conservationist, the presence of death is present right from the start of the novel, and continues to draw nearer still as we witness his gradual demise, even though the novel ends before he has crossed over to the 'other side'. Bray is entirely committed to political action whilst Mehring completely rejects such commitment, yet neither can be termed a hero of committed literature because their stories have nothing to prove. Yet, paradoxically, both of these books are inherently political because of the implicit (and more rarely explicit) questions which they pose. Moreover, politics are present throughout, particularly in unexpected ways. Proof of this can be found in the choice of title,

The Conservationist, a word which clearly belongs to specialised political jargon, whereas the protagonist himself is never found speaking in this register and believes himself free of it. Furthermore, it can be said that the title of the novel is the only instance of author interference in her character and her only judgement of him. Everything else is (somewhat inconclusively) left to the reader's interpretation, particularly since this is one of those books in which the writer, to borrow Gordimer's own expression in her Nobel Lecture, 'uses the word even against his or her own loyalties'.[8]

Irony, Derision and Paradox

In *The Conservationist* it is also possible to observe an almost constant ironic tone which is so far removed from any understanding of a 'committed writer' but which at the same time appears increasingly to be the hallmark of Gordimer's writing. This tone is very noticeable in the book that followed *July's People*, and it cannot help but intrigue the reader. *A Sport of Nature* (1987) is one of Gordimer's most enigmatic novels and the most 'incorrect', if one uses the term 'political correctness' that is so fashionable nowadays. The long narrative is ironic both in its totality and in the detail of its scenes, even if, picking up on certain aspects of *A Guest of Honour*, it is the novel in which Gordimer is the most 'committed to' the description of African independence, culminating in South Africa's own independence.

Although the novel appears to be primarily the personal account of a young white woman and her relationships with black men in various African countries, the ironic tone must surely be a counterweight to the enormity of historical events that are being depicted. This tone is the opposite of what one might expect in an epic story that is every bit as gripping as Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (another of Gordimer's favourite authors). Even if it is only to enjoy Gordimer's irony, it is indeed worth examining this unusual literature which defies complete clarification. It is both so deeply politicised and yet barely militant, and so, in both form and content, it acts as a counterweight to all the clichés of struggle literature.

That Gordimer is a great fan of Milan Kundera should be a warning to those who confuse irony with indifference. The derision that springs up sporadically in her novels is intimately linked to the subtle but undeniable pathos which is the other main feature of her work. Where does this muted, unacknowledged pain come from? One can clearly see its origins in those novels with white female protagonists, like *Burger's Daughter* (1979), or, more recently, *None to Accompany Me* (1994). The theme of solitude is obvious in the latter work, and one suspects that therein lies a source of pathos. Yet this is evoked in a paradoxical and roundabout manner because it is a solitude both chosen and desired, as in *The Conservationist*. In *Burger's Daughter*, despite Gordimer's distancing technique, one feels the pain suffered by the main character: at the start of the book the protagonist is still a young girl of thirteen who has come to visit her mother in prison. At the end of the book she herself is imprisoned for having joined the underground movement. Observance of this repetitive pattern brings with it a tragic feeling of terror and pity, almost as if it were a family curse.

Other instances of this tragic feeling lead us to think that Gordimer's writing is where the modern novel takes over from ancient tragedy. Yet such a perception must be tackled in the light of seemingly contrary evidence. Gordimer believes in history, not destiny, and human, rather than divine, intervention. Moreover, were this not so, it would be impossible to understand the inconclusive nature of her open-ended novels, whether taken individually or viewed as an entire collection. Tragedy and liberty clash, and it would be wrong to expect either to triumph in the end.

This open-endedness and lack of triumph are irrefutable characteristics of Gordimer's writing, and are particularly evident in three of her post-1990 novels. The fate of the blacks after the end of apartheid is certainly not depicted in a triumphant fashion, even though the author's satisfaction after forty years of struggle should not be underestimated. There are, of course, some blacks who settle very nicely into their new roles as leaders and members of the bourgeoisie. The example of a black political leader who has reached an influential position despite his humble

beginnings can be found in *None to Accompany Me* (1994), whilst the black lawyer in *The House Gun* (1998) is an example of a member of the black bourgeoisie whose success crowns his many years of dedication to the struggle. Yet there is also no shortage of black activists who do not reap the success that they deserve. We have already seen a tragic example of this in *A Guest of Honour*; yet in the South African context, *My Son's Story* is another, no less tragic case. As for the whites in Gordimer's writing, they suffer from what can be called tritely an 'identity crisis', particularly in *None to Accompany Me* and *The House Gun*. Indeed, how should one understand the last of Vera Stark's transformations in *None to Accompany Me*? Or the curious reversal that takes place within the family which makes the definition of what, in modern living, is reckless or conformist, new or less new, so ambiguous? There is little value in stating that the unfortunate young white man who is the protagonist of *The House Gun* is ambiguous and searching for himself, for this could only be an allusion to his vacillation between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Yet it is clear that this hesitation is symbolic and that the protagonist is also in the process of transformation, perhaps one of the sacrificial lambs needed for the foundation of a new society.

Inconclusiveness, an ironic tone, subtle pathos, ambiguity and the search for identity – it is difficult to see these as characteristic of a literature of struggle, a struggle which has now been won. One must move from one brilliantly and intelligently posed question to the next, happy in the knowledge that one is sharing the intimate journey of a woman who has learnt to put her ego last. Let us finish by discussing aspects of Gordimer's work which might occasionally isolate the Francophone reader: the terms 'paradox' or 'paradoxical'. Gordimer evokes situations which seem based on possible imbalance, thereby preventing a fuller and more enthusiastic interaction with the text. Yet it is in fact the paradoxical which is at the core of these situations, or at least those situations which are most frequently depicted by Gordimer. Is it not paradoxical that a white man should fight against apartheid on the side of the blacks, when he knows only too well that his very presence, and that of his fellow whites, has been made possible through past subjugation and

expropriation, and current denial of black rights? This when he does not, and cannot, know whether the blacks, when in power, will disregard that past, and tolerate the whites alongside them? This when many blacks themselves affirm the contrary, and the independence of other African countries in the past has not exactly been reassuring in this regard? And yet in Gordimer's work, the one thing that is never questioned is the necessity to fight against apartheid (as a white activist on the side of the blacks). We see that the greatest risk is not only what might happen *after* apartheid, but what already exists in the *here and now*: bad faith, the ridiculous and the absurd. To speak of the paradoxical position of white activists is effectively to bring out their 'tragedy' without actually using that word, or any other which might have spine-chilling connotations.

At this point, we must warn those readers who are possibly ill-informed about South Africa. For a book with a title as simple as *Burger's Daughter* cannot help but be understood as a tragedy, if one knows that 'Burger' is a name of Afrikaner origin, and as such, a white female activist bearing this name is the incarnation of a paradox. The reason for this, particularly if she is an 'hereditary' activist following in her mother's and father's footsteps, is that she feels obligated to fight against the vast majority of the group to which she belongs by name and outward appearance. Whatever her actions (will she? won't she?), one can imagine that herein lies a twofold contradictory inheritance; it will be more difficult for her to fight against what she has inherited from her father, even if she does not find justification in her race or ancestry. The most remarkable thing, however, is that Gordimer never actually brings us into the dramatic 'storm' inside the head of Burger's daughter. The conflict of discovering who she wants to be and what she wants to do is an almost silent struggle, waged in complete solitude, and visible through only a few exterior signs, with the rest left to our imagination.

The behaviour of another 'inheritor', this time a boy, is more enigmatic still: he is the son in *My Son's Story*, unable to continue the family activism, which is as prestigious, omnipresent and emotionally loaded as it was in the Burger family. Will is a paradoxical boy, who claims he can

do nothing except write, because all the other members of his family have monopolised the action. Yet there are paradoxes within paradoxes: in *A Sport of Nature* Hillela's brilliant political career makes her the wife and counsellor of an African President, whilst in the white families with whom she spent her adolescence she never showed the slightest interest in the problems of black people, nor tried to help them in any way.

In Gordimer's world, paradoxes are commonplace; only her talent as a novelist can shed light on them. It is her talent, but also her discipline, that prevent her from taking the easy way out and surrendering to lyricism or, what some might call, inspiration. The particularity of the South African context and the difficulties that it creates for whites who rebel against the dominant ideology of their group create the need for indifference, a type of detachment from immediate existence and a journey, both laborious and unpleasant, into the world of ideas. In South Africa one cannot avoid taking up a political stance. One such stance is to claim adherence to the concrete world of sensations or past experience, as Gordimer does by way of demonstration in her portrayal of the Conservationist. White South Africans who wish to fight against apartheid must not give in to what characterises the dominant ideology of their group, a type of virulent anti-intellectualism, the idea that one must stick to nature, to immediate and true things which cannot be debated. This position is one of the most tempting there is, and it is not easy to resist its temptation, either as a human being or *a fortiori* as a writer. There is, then, in Gordimer's writing a whole series of mechanisms aimed at guaranteeing a crucial distance. Certain readers might well prefer the chance to be intimately involved with those who are suffering for a just cause, as opposed to those who may or may not be suffering, but who are anyway in the wrong. Gordimer's work is written in part against the author herself, as well as against certain facts. Herein can be found the internal tension that ensures that her novels, based as they are upon History, are both a contemporary form of tragedy and its rejection through derision.

1

1958–1998: A Journey through History

The aim of this journey is not to follow step by step, book after book, every work of fiction ever written by Nadine Gordimer. Although Gordimer does flash back to the past and cast projections into the future, it can be said that, *grosso modo*, her works follow the course of historical events in Africa in general and South Africa in particular. In this sense, Gordimer would in all likelihood espouse the theory of the novel as a reflection of reality, thereby endorsing a position shared by, amongst others, the great French writers Balzac and Stendhal. But one can also take from the journey travelled the idea that her writing is extraordinarily comprehensive, or, to use a cliché, 'lifelike' in that individuals and society, political structures and ways of life all occur simultaneously. Major transformations lie below the surface and cannot be pinpointed at any one particular moment, but well up like natural springs, to flow finally in their full force, and it is then that we can measure the distance that has been covered. In order to appreciate the way in which Gordimer's novels are characterised by her awareness of history, we will consider two of her early books, already briefly touched upon as representing her initial concerns: *A World of Strangers*, which was published in 1958, and *The Late Bourgeois World*, published in 1966. Moving on to what is the culmination of her writing in 2000, we will examine two of her later novels, *None to Accompany Me* (1994) and *The House Gun* (1998) as testimony to a new state of affairs and people who, in more than one respect, present an inverted image of what is seen in the first two novels.

As already stated, the main themes to be covered will be the so-called male/female divide and the relations between blacks and whites.

As it was in the beginning

> *'Archbishop Desmond Tutu – he and I have discovered – as a child lived for some time in the black ghetto across the veld from the town where I, too, was growing up; there was as much chance of us meeting then as there was of a moon landing.'*[1]

A World of Strangers

A World of Strangers is a groundbreaking first book because its avowed main objective is to expose what is both essential and inconceivable in South Africa – the reality of the apartheid system. That is, not only the principle of apartheid and its set of laws, (in)famous for their iniquity, but also the way in which these laws underpin the everyday functioning of society. Gordimer's constant repetition of the word 'stranger' serves to express this concept, and implies that the main social groups in the country, essentially the blacks and the whites, do not know one another and do not have any sort of relationship. It is thus that, even after having spent nearly a year in Johannesburg, the hero of the novel still says with astonishment, 'None of the people I know here seem to know each other' (1958, 183). It is a segregated, isolated country, and that is why Gordimer has had to resort to a novelistic technique to portray its plurality, which, in reality, has become invisible to each group of inhabitants.

The way in which Gordimer affirms herself as a novelist (even though by 1958 she had already been a writer for ten years or so) is one which enables her to effect a reversal of the common view. The visibility of apartheid and the strange estrangement between groups would not have been possible without the presence of a real 'stranger', using the word in its conventional sense. The main protagonist of the novel, Toby, a young Englishman, comes to Johannesburg for the first time with little or no idea of what awaits him. Paradoxically, it is his very status as a stranger that enables him to ignore the divisions in this 'world

of strangers' and to pass from one side to the other 'like an Orpheus' (1958, 197).

It is appropriate to dwell a moment on this new novelistic technique, which is far more than a mere process, in that it refutes the usual approach and actively demands that the latter be surpassed. Whereas each one of us, by virtue of a primal narcissism, goes towards the Other defining him as such by his relationship with ourselves, the novelist adopts the Other's viewpoint, a viewpoint which sees itself together with the society to which it belongs. This reversal allows Gordimer to play upon the meaning of the word 'stranger', thus bringing out its ambivalence. In *A World of Strangers*, the strangers are not people from the outside, foreigners to South Africa, but rather they are South Africans themselves observed by impartial eyes. Embracing the movement that characterised the 'Age of Enlightenment' and Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*,[2] Gordimer uses a type of split-vision, the aim of which is not so much objectivity as the possibility of a critical viewpoint, that is both lucid and naïve at the same time. Young Toby is not an innocent, nor is he even one of the supposed 'objective observers'. On the contrary, his eyes are wide open upon this foreign, unknown society in which he arrives. At the beginning of the novel, Toby's point of view must be one that enables him to really *see* apartheid, and as the saying goes, he literally does not believe his eyes. It would not have been as believable had Gordimer used a white member of South African society as her spokesperson in the novel, because right from the start, this same society would have labelled the character as an opponent, thus invalidating his judgements through bias. This is much harder to do when dealing with a stranger's viewpoint. In this way Gordimer plays upon the meaning of the word 'stranger', all the while knowing that the strangers which truly interest her are the South Africans themselves, members of a society deeply divided from within.

Gordimer's invented novelistic situation helps the reader to understand that apartheid is characterised by two contradictory features: just as it blinds those from the outside, so does it seem invisible to those within the system. As in Edgar Allan Poe's famous story, 'The Stolen

Letter',[3] apartheid is hidden by too much evidence which prevents it from being seen. Everything occurs as if the staggering absurdity of the system, which cannot help but dumbfound the onlooker, were invisible to those within. And, without resorting to ideological analysis, the novelist must make the reader understand how this situation came about. In some way, apartheid became naturalised as if the current system had been the consequence of natural evolution, rather than the effect of political will imposed by laws – that famous 'nature of things', which, by definition, cannot be called into question. The entire novel rests upon this representation of the situation as 'natural', except in the rare moments when one realises that it is, in fact, protected by extremely violent, consensual taboos.

The paradox inherent in the book (and which is only one of the many forms of paradox present throughout Gordimer's works) is the way in which a general truth – here taken to extremes – is applied to the South African context: the more unjust the situation, the more it is passed off as an indisputable state of fact. When anti-apartheid opposition developed in the 1950s, in the form of the communists and the ANC (African National Congress), those in power responded by denouncing it as extravagant, unrealistic and insane: after all, apartheid could be the only sensible and viable political regime in South Africa. To give the force of law to such an untruth implies that one is relentlessly defending oneself against the dangerous 'perversion' of a few troublemakers. And as their demands rest upon intellectual debates, they can be countered by supposedly indisputable 'realities'.

Through Toby, the intermediary whose concerns are certainly never political, Gordimer wishes to shake the convictions of the people with whom she mixes (surely infrequently) or knows, the type who constitute the majority of white society. Above all, she does not try to persuade them by militant discourse, but on the contrary indulges in satirical humour at the expense of commonplace white behaviour and attitudes. Gordimer's motivation seems rather different: is it not unthinkable that a society which is so deeply divided could really endure, or even defend itself efficiently? Yes, the system does exist and, as a system, apartheid

has managed to impose itself; yes, blacks and whites do rub shoulders with one another without ever mixing or communicating. Yet the slightest transgression, even caused by the thoughtlessness of a stranger like Toby, would not provoke such reactions if the system were not extremely vulnerable and under constant threat.

Once the scales have fallen from the eyes of the impartial observer, what comes to light is the extreme precariousness of apartheid society. A 'world of strangers' does exist, and South Africa is proof of this, but at what price, at the cost of what consensus, of what naivety, and of what repression? It is the writer's job to show us this, and Gordimer goes to great lengths to do so on more than one occasion. In *A World of Strangers* there are explicit confessions of the relatively obscure fears shared by the whites of the country. Take, for example, the episode when Toby questions Anna Louw: 'I was told that no one walks in the streets here, at night,' I said. She said candidly, "It's not so much that we're in danger, but that we're so terribly afraid." We both laughed. "You're not," I said, convincedly. "Oh yes I am," she said. "Afraid of the dark"' (1958, 80).

In fact, fear is also the subject of one of Gordimer's short stories (although in length it could almost be a novel), 'Something Out There'. In this story, which is also the title of the collection in which it is found, one sees how an insignificant event, the misdeeds of a baboon on the loose, incites panic and wild imaginings amongst the most diverse people. It is almost as if they transfer to this pathetic event a fear that would be a good deal more justified if they knew that very close to them a group of terrorists was plotting an attack. Fear is, however, in the air and a climate of fear reigns in the country, bringing in its wake a frantic search for safety. Somewhat perversely, the consequences of this search are often not only tragic but sometimes fatal, a subject which forms the basis of another short story, the disturbing 'Once Upon a Time' (*Jump and Other Stories*). In what is ostensibly a children's tale, the parents of a small boy, in the grips of the security syndrome, install on the walls of their house a horrifying system of razor-sharp metal bars, and the small boy is accidentally mutilated by this merciless device. This is how the novelist

attacks apartheid most effectively, not in the name of justice or by denouncing the iniquity of the system, but by demonstrating how those whom it is supposed to protect are, in fact, cruelly also its victims.

In *A World of Strangers*, the consequences of fear also play a key role in shaping the behaviour of Cecil, the main female protagonist, in such a way that female behaviour becomes linked to fear through Gordimer's general account of the situation.

Cecil is a young white woman who mixes with the cream of society, although she herself is in a financially precarious position. She quickly and easily becomes Toby's friend, to their mutual satisfaction. Their physical relationship is strong and it far outweighs any other form of communication between them. Something unspoken stands between the two, and at first this seems to be purely Toby's fault. However, it soon becomes clear that it emanates from Cecil's side as well. Toby does not speak to Cecil about his relationship with the blacks, nor, in particular, of the very strong friendship that binds him to one of them, Steven Sitole. Nor does Cecil tell Toby that she has been informed of this by local gossip, at least not until the moment when they are about to part because she is to marry another man; that is when she shyly asks him, 'Did you really have natives coming to see you in your flat?' (1958, 262).

Despite Toby's attempts to make her understand that he really shares a deep friendship with Steven, Cecil does not manage, and moreover does not even try, to overcome the taboos of apartheid, 'You know, I can't imagine it – I mean, a black man next to me at table, talking to me like anyone else. The idea of *touching* their hands –' (1958, 262). Cecil's inability to accept the presence and existence of the blacks, even in theory, is part of a larger inability to venture even slightly out of her fragile cocoon; indeed her entire life revolves around protecting herself at every possible opportunity. This is evidently the reason for her marriage to a man who will bring her 'security', the same man who told her of Toby's socialising with the blacks.

When it comes to this socialising, what takes place, or rather what does not take place, between Cecil and Toby, is not just some unimportant little secret; it is the existence of something unthought-of, a vertiginous

void if looked at too closely. As a pretty young woman who is both needy and penniless, Cecil, of course, has her particular weaknesses, yet these lead us to her inner core, to her fears and to her anxieties, which turn out to be stronger than love – be it the love of a man or of her child. As a result of inner fears, Cecil is not a receptive woman. Nor is she a feeling being, or very rarely so, because in the world in which she lives, fear breeds vigilance and extreme caution, even cynicism.

Within the oppressive surroundings, there is only one area of Cecil's and Toby's relationship in which they are not strangers (this is decidedly the key-word of the novel). It is their physical, *stricto sensu* sexual, relationship which can already be seen to inspire true fascination in Gordimer, in the sense that it mixes the mechanical and the elusive within its mysterious functioning. It is, furthermore, one of the rare cases when the novelist incorporates the notion of mystery, which stems from the fact that sex is the only truly autonomous domain in human behaviour. Sexual relationships escape social, political and ideological boundaries; that is why, despite Cecil's constant fears, this is one area in which she can express herself freely. However, this example also allows us to see how what gives strength to sex is also its weakness: it is completely limited and cannot be surpassed. Sexuality is effectively a separate world which cannot communicate and thus cannot bring about social change or exert any influence.

To state that sexuality is a separate world is not without problems, for Gordimer's point of view in this novel pleads in an exemplary fashion against all interactions based on separation and any form of isolation that might counter communication. It can happen that sexual divisions thwart the prohibitions of apartheid in an unexpected, even amusing, manner. In the short story entitled 'Safe Houses' in *Jump and Other Stories*, we see how a white activist and member of the underground movement meets a white middle-class woman on the bus, becomes her lover, and for a time finds unexpected refuge with her. Their sexual relationship both unites and satisfies them, admittedly only temporarily, as she is unaware of the underground world of the Struggle, and is nothing other than an idle bourgeois lady in search of diversion. This paradoxical, ironic

tale is just the kind that we have come to expect from Gordimer, and the limits of the short story genre are perfectly suited to the constraints of the relationship that she is describing. In *A World of Strangers*, it appears that sexuality cannot change Cecil, nor can it rescue her from conformism and cowardliness. Against fear, sex is but a temporary way out; faced with the enormous problems of this society, it is by no means a solution.

As for the potential of black/white relationships, the novel shows that apartheid leads to a huge waste; the whites experience this as an excision, even though they refuse to acknowledge it. As for Toby, he becomes aware of this immense loss through Steven's accidental death, a death that occurs in absurd circumstances which are obviously linked to the damned and self-destructive life he has been leading. Steven and Toby share a complicity based on the feeling that they complement one another because of their differences. Toby realises this, while reflecting upon their first encounter during a night of inspired and prolific drunkenness: 'Created by drink or not, I had had few such moments in my life, even in my own country, among my own friends. We did not understand each other; we wanted the same thing' (1958, 103). Gordimer is at great pains to point out that their friendship is in no way based on political closeness, nor on any desire that Toby might have to behave better than the other whites by not giving in to the surrounding racism. There is no question of this because the two boys are anything but activists. Toby loves Steven for what he is, his good qualities and his weaknesses, if one wishes to resort to simplistic vocabulary. He can appreciate in Steven a relationship to life that is very different from what he has known up to then, a unique relationship with others and with women in particular, which nowadays would not be politically correct, but which in Toby's eyes has the huge value of being out of the ordinary and of deriving meaning purely from itself. The white community in Johannesburg would view Steven as *persona non grata* even if he were not black, although it is true that in that society it is the blacks who assume the role of marginalised rebels. However, Steven's behaviour is no more acceptable to Anna, a young white woman, who in spite of her generosity cannot escape

her militant view of the black cause. To her, Steven is harming this cause by behaving like a thug, and thereby justifying the racist prejudices of the whites who associate black people with hooligans. In this way, Gordimer adopts a completely original position by sparing us a portrait of the deserving black man, the victim of white racists who refuse to recognise his merits and grant him a position based on his true worth. In fact, one never finds portraits of 'good', virtuous but mistreated blacks in Gordimer's writing, as such portraits can be only idealised, omitting what Marx termed as the real determining factors at work in society – the tragedy of apartheid is precisely that the best black people, the most gifted and the most intelligent, turn 'bad', and become gangsters. This is their only possible response to the destiny that has been inflicted upon them. Gordimer's conviction is that one cannot fight racial prejudice by presenting the blacks in an unrealistic light. In her eyes, it is more useful to make us understand that if Toby chooses to be friends with Steven, it is not simply to be able to 'go off the rails' by acting like him. Steven is the product of his way of life since birth, and this way of life would only be a borrowed garment on Toby. Yet through Steven's gestures, attitudes and actions, Toby is able to sense what this way of life is about, completely obscured by a white society which represses it into total secrecy. Steven represents the hidden face of a world that claims to be pure and unblemished. He is the product of both the rejection that he must endure, and the form of resistance that he has chosen. Steven creates a much harsher denial of the white world as an antisocial rebel than by being an activist. For if he were part of the black movement, one could openly oppose and imprison him as an enemy of the State. His attitude and choices are perhaps not the result of any clear awareness, but rather are intuitive. Steven knows himself to be incapable of assimilation into white society, and it is thus that he best asserts what cannot be taken from him. Even his death (in a car accident after leaving a nightclub) becomes a way of escaping the police who are on his trail. Steven possesses the fascinating gift of re-introducing freedom to the oppressive apartheid regime which shackles his people. The ambiguity of his role, troublemaker or victim, is surely part of the reason why Toby is attracted

to him; indeed, it is because Steven incites questioning in a society that refuses to listen.

That a man as intelligent and gifted as Steven should be wiped out is a loss for society as a whole, not just for his friends. By depriving itself of those people who could lift it to a higher level, this society condemns itself to atrophy and dullness. 'Dull' is indeed the word that comes to mind to describe those young whites, pleasant though they may be, with whom Toby, the narrator, mixes simply because they are of the same age and have shared interests. Yet, here too, the waste is twofold: a waste from Toby's point of view, as he can never truly attain their friendship, and a waste for them, because they can never break out of the narrow circle created by the social inhibitions which are imposed upon them. One sees these rich, handsome young men more closely during a guinea-fowl hunt, to which Toby is invited. On a superficial level, the camaraderie which is established between the men is no less real, but the novelist's irony works wonders here by showing us all the limits of the experience: its 'boy-scout' style, although hearty, is also based on a relationship which, by definition, must be restrictive. In essence, this limitation is the result of a purely physical (and therefore superficial) lifestyle. Ultimately, the only value affirmed here is that of the group, in such a way that there is the notion of consensual functioning based on 'the unspoken'. That is, each member of the group knows what he shares with the others without having to explain it. Although this type of consensus exists in every culture, in South Africa it is a question of survival.

Of course, the guinea-fowl hunt takes place in a natural environment; indeed nature plays a role in the novelistic process, as it too adds to the feeling of wasted happiness, having been diverted from its intended use and thus corrupted. For nature is profoundly captivating and beautiful; in fact, this is one of the first things that the novelist wishes to tell us about her country. It is a country that is first and foremost a geographical region and a physical collection of sensations. These are strong sensations that produce a boundless emotional effect on man and which, by rights, should not be reserved for any one group alone, as they are so far from human expropriation and ownership.

Yet this hunt shows us that the rich young white men, who are in fact perfectly capable of feeling these sensations, turn them to their own advantage to create the consensus. On this occasion, nature is devoted to the virile entertainment of these young South Africans. It is a possessive relationship that a psychoanalyst would not hesitate to attribute partly to eroticism. This relationship is all the more suspect as it is one of collective possession in the sense that there is a type of fusion both within the group and between the participants and nature. From this comes its extreme seductiveness which the novelist unhesitatingly incorporates: there is pleasure in ignoring the world of ideas, in confining oneself to immediate sensations of a poetic variety. Yet insofar as these sensations speak of nothing but themselves, they should not be used for ideological purposes. One realises, however, that the irrationality of presence in the world is implicitly and ideologically transformed into reason: the reason of the individual being, the collective reason of being present and of affirming one's right to be politically present. The whites in South Africa ask of nature what, by definition, it cannot provide – justification.

These Sartre-like warnings against the idea of nature are non-theorised and integrated into the subject matter of the novel. The notion of nature has become the favoured weapon of right-wing conservatives and as such inspires great suspicion among the left wing. It is, of course, a complex warning because, by being confined to abstract idealism, the left wing runs the risk of fading away into obscurity.

In this novel, which is but her second, Gordimer appreciates that the role of the left wing is to denounce their potential – and occasionally real – flaws so that the nature/culture dialectic cannot enhance right-wing arguments. The latter must not have exclusive access to the term 'nature' and all that it implies as a guarantee of authenticity. Gordimer initiates a process in *A World of Strangers* (1958) which she will later develop in *The Conservationist* (1974). This entails giving the antagonist more credit than he deserves so that he will not make use of his own assets. After deciding on the novelistic genre, Gordimer probably realised what all great novelists know intuitively: if the novel is not dialogue, then it is nothing. That is, the novel exists both because of the commitment

that inspires it (perhaps better omitted from the literary sphere) and because of the many contradictions that it lays bare.

In this way, the assessment conveyed by *A World of Strangers*, and the reason for writing the novel, is more ironic than critical and more problematic than militant. The novelist's position regarding activism appears ambiguous and is held in suspense; in fact, one could say that the ending of the book is symbolic of this type of uncertainty and expectation. We do not know if Toby will choose to return to England or remain in Johannesburg; nor does Toby himself know the answer. He goes away, but not very far and not for very long, saying that he will come back, and the novelist does not give us any means of resolving this for him. Yet, even if Toby were to decide to stay, it would not necessarily mean that he had decided to become an activist for the Struggle, because he shies away from that type of activity.

In *A World of Strangers* there is a white female activist who is a bit like those to be found in *Burger's Daughter* and *None to Accompany Me*. This young woman, Anna, is of Afrikaner stock and thus finds herself, like Rosa Burger, in a paradoxical situation. The love of an Indian man (a form of personal rebellion), has led her to escape from her background. Then, like many activists, she completes her recruitment training as a member of the Communist Party, after which there is no turning back. In fact, traces of Stalinism can be seen in the rigour that she applies to what she senses and portrays as defiance: her militant support for the black cause.

We already know that Anna, unlike Toby, judges Steven Sitole harshly because he does not advance the Cause. On the whole, Gordimer does not seem to want to portray her as particularly captivating, even less so as seductive. Anna is presented only from a distance and with a kind of reserve. She is a character who is too easily defined, someone who becomes an activist as one would embrace religion, concerned mostly with following the rules and making sure that others follow them too. It is tempting to see Anna as the expression of a certain masochism, as if she were punishing herself for guilt from which Toby and Steven, on the other hand, are exempt.

The description of Anna is not well-developed nor is she given a large place. What emerges most clearly is a certain type of activist who is a stranger to the Byronic Romantic notion of commitment. The portrayal that the novelist wishes to give as characteristic of her era is that of an activism that has become curiously working class under the influence of the so-called workers' party. In Stalin's time, passionate commitment, even at the service of the oppressed, disappeared completely.

However, Gordimer does not see this as a critique of the black cause or of its validity. She seems expectant, on the edge of something which fascinates her more than anything else in the world: this society, this world of strangers that is hers. The choice of a character like Toby from outside this society enables her, through a process of identification, to adopt a position which is certainly only possible for the novelist: that of being simultaneously both inside and out.

From this position, Gordimer is also willing to recognise the discomfort of bad faith. Her method is to take on the other party's arguments, thereby denouncing novelistic pretentiousness in an ironic, Proustian fashion. It is Toby who speaks of a certain role that is expected of him and that he has no desire to play: 'I had no intention of becoming what they saw me as, what they, in their own peculiar brand of salaciousness, envied me the opportunity to become – a *voyeur* of the world's ills and social perversions' (1958, 36). If Toby, as spokesperson, is speaking on the novelist's position as a writer, then it is possible to see a warning in this, reminiscent of the irony used by Proust at the expense of the Goncourt-like novelist, who at salons would peer from behind his monocle and proclaim, 'Ah, I seeee.' It is certainly possible that Gordimer was in fact making reference to this, because the general tone of the book is rather Proustian, in its descriptions of the cliques that go to make up society, in both the usual and worldly sense of the word. The book abounds in brilliant, witty scenes full of social satire. It is obvious that the novelist derives all the pleasure she can from writing but, at the same time, she seems aware of the limitations that would arise, were she not to go beyond this stage. Just as Proust is not a novelist in the mould of the Goncourt brothers, because of his master plan to construct an

enormous 'cathedral' that will 'house' his collected writings, so too does Gordimer know full well that either she or Toby must finally decide to commit, even if not in the militant sense of the word.

A World of Strangers is successful as an opening work in the same way as the overture of an opera. Furthermore, the best moment of the book is the beginning, or prologue, when Toby is still on the boat that takes him from England to South Africa. The scenes that take place on board are not unlike the dinners at Madame Verdurin's in Proust's *Swann in Love*: they are meant both for immediate enjoyment and to put in place the themes that will play out in the symphony to follow. The luxurious, idle life led by the white passengers on the ship, their desire to affirm that this is what they are used to, their comings and goings with the sole purpose of spending time and money, the totally superficial and uncultivated character of apparent social ease are all, by definition, linked to the temporary stay on the boat, but are handled by Gordimer as a metaphor for the white South African way of life. In the words of one of Fellini's (no less metaphorical) film titles, *E la nave va*. Yet towards what, and why, and for how long will the ship sail on? As young and thoughtless as he is, even Toby understands that this is the *real* question but also the question that cannot by any stretch of the imagination be asked. He is embarking on a rite of passage down into the depths of a world that means to present only its façade to him, at the risk of revealing its flawed interior. Yet, as Toby discovers during the sea crossing, his behaviour is antithetical to that of the other whites, who are characterised by an interminable, wayward restlessness, a repetitive oscillation designed to maintain a false equilibrium. This pseudo-equilibrium is certainly the most fragile and insane thing – but how much more time will it take to convince those dancing on the bridge?

A World of Strangers is a prologue to the works to come. After this brilliant overture, we must delve deeper into the faults that fissure the beautiful edifice from the inside. Gordimer herself is there inside, because the time of illusory and fictional exteriority is over, and this at the risk of a certain regression. Yet something has to give, as is seen in her next novel *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966).

The Late Bourgeois World

The novel *The Late Bourgeois World*, like *A World of Strangers*, is a scene-setter. Gordimer does not, however, merely give a brief overview of society in its entirety. The perspective of the novel is continuously limited by immediate personal preoccupations and the main protagonist (far from being oriented towards the discovery of an unknown world) is, on the contrary, weighed down by her past. The scene is set by assessing past and present experiences as well as the premonition of those yet to come, at a moment in the life of one woman, Liz van den Sandts, a moment which must surely be considered as her true entry into adult life.

Liz is not starting out in life; her first marriage was to Max, by whom she had a son, Bruce, who is about twelve years old. She is currently involved in a long-term relationship with another man, Graham; her daily life is a well-established routine, and she intends to do her best to harmonise her various activities. However, as the book opens, two events occur in her life which provoke a series of reflections that perhaps signal a new beginning for her. Meanwhile, the two events allow the novelist to summarise, in the most punctilious and precise meaning of the word: the reader will share only a few moments with this young, white, thirty-two-year-old South African woman.

The main difference between this book and *A World of Strangers* is that here the narrator is a woman, and the novelist appears very interested in the female characteristics of Liz's perception of the world, her situation, problems and behaviour. Yet is this sufficient reason to consider the novel as directly autobiographical, especially as there is an age difference between the novelist, forty-three years old at the time of publication, and her heroine, who is about ten years younger? Rather, this is how a mature woman might look upon another woman as the latter discovers what it is to attain the 'age of reason'.

One of the characteristics of this age is, without a doubt, an awareness of death, whereas formerly death is simply known to exist. In fact, for the first-person narrator, Liz, the novel begins when she learns that her ex-husband, Max, has committed suicide. The effect of this news is perhaps not immediate; rather it disseminates throughout the brief period of

Liz's life to which the reader is privy. The second, very different event that sets the scene is the unexpected arrival of a black activist called Luke. Although Liz has known him for a long time, on this occasion he has come to request something specific of her, which involves her making a difficult decision. Through the three very distinct male figures (Max, Graham and Luke), who each play a different role in Liz's life, the novelist gets to the heart of the matter with a three-dimensional analysis which covers the essential points. That is, the meaning of white political activism, the significance of the couple and the role of a man in a woman's life, and the possible meaning of commitment as the symbolic affirmation of women's emancipation. So much could seem overwhelming, were the novelist not to navigate these themes with skill and discretion. Gordimer's economy of expression probably qualifies the text as a long short story, all the more so since it is short for a novel. However, the scope of problems tackled (the acceptance of death as a concrete reality and the attempt to evaluate, at least implicitly, certain feminist theses), places it firmly within the novelistic genre. Thus the scene is well and truly set in a way in which the character of Liz becomes a precursor, heralding the great female figures to follow such as Rosa in *Burger's Daughter* and Vera in *None to Accompany Me.* These personas evolve much later, whereas Liz's development belongs, at least in part, to Gordimer's early novels, whilst still paving the way for the novelist's later works. Liz is beginning to understand that she is at a crossroads, caught between a dead past and a future that must still be shaped, and it is this particular moment that is the subject of the novel.

What aspect is being dealt with from the moment of Max's tragic death? Max's surname is not unimportant. He was born Max van den Sandts, the son of an upper-class Afrikaner family who always considered him as the heir. However, from an early age, Max was a rebellious son, intent on breaking away from the bourgeois world through his involvement in radical, revolutionary-inspired political activities. He joined a cell of the Communist Party and threw himself into the political battle on the side of the blacks. Thus he believed he was burying *The Late Bourgeois World*; but the manner of his death indicates clearly both recovery and

reversal. Caught during an attempted bombing, Max could not endure the ordeal of prison and betrayed his former comrades by turning State witness. He was set free, but everything points to his suicide being the result of unbearable guilt over his betrayal. He drowned himself by driving his car into the sea. One might expatiate in poor taste on the symbolism of this immersion: a fatal immersion in militancy or a no less deadly suffocation in the stranglehold of the bourgeois world? Max and Liz had been divorced for a long time when these events occurred, and besides, she played only a very small role in her husband's militant actions while they were married; she was more involved in grilling sausages to feed the activists during their preparations or elated discussions. With the passing of time, Liz's distress comes largely from the feeling that poor Max had suicidal tendencies well before he drowned himself, and that the subconscious motivations of his political activities doomed him to failure, even catastrophe. Max's own excesses could easily have been those of any young bourgeois who is overzealous in order to better sow his wild oats; not that this takes any responsibility away from those involved, not least the communists who made use of him.

A very harsh judgement emanates from this book, and the impression is that at the time that it was written, Gordimer was still very close to rejecting militant activism and communism as in *A World of Strangers*. It was only thirteen years later that she would attempt a more balanced and complete assessment in *Burger's Daughter*. This analysis would not make the enormous waste of human lives brought about by communist-style militancy seem any less important, but it would do so with more depth and less aggression. In *The Late Bourgeois World* the time is not yet ripe for retrospective, historical objectivity. It seems that, at the time, Gordimer's stance approached the political analyses of Albert Camus, a writer whom she greatly admired and whose anti-communist views can be seen in occasional polemics, notably with Sartre. Camus was able to adopt a kind of humanist stance, violent none the less, so vast was the implacable brutality of militant communism. Behind this reading of Camus, reference can certainly be made to Dostoyevsky, the Russian author being a long-time favourite of Gordimer. Yet *The Late Bourgeois*

World remains a short novel with limited ambitions. This is primarily the liquidation stage, when the bourgeois world and its final incarnation, the suicide of its finest sons through rebellion against an unacceptable legacy, are liquidated simultaneously.

This 'liquidation' obviously refers to Liz's feelings and what is going on in her head, not what is happening in reality. In real life, everything goes on just the same: the bourgeois world, the suicidal militancy and the criminal repression used by those in power. Although Liz is not personally involved, she lives in this society without any particular scruples and in this respect is no different from her lover Graham, who is himself a typical reflection of the surrounding environment.

Graham is the man with whom Liz has lived for a number of years, and moreover, with whom she is still living at the end of the novel. If the novel is to be taken as an assessment, the verdict on this type of man would be 'lukewarm'. Furthermore, the novel is the continuation of what was first mooted with Toby and Cecil in *A World of Strangers*. For Liz, Graham is a 'friend with benefits', a part-time companion with whom she 'gets on well'. In fact, they do not 'engage'. In this context, the word must be understood as having a double meaning; it can be taken negatively as fighting or conflict, as well as positively in the sense of affinity and common interests. Gordimer raises the problem of those successful couples who seemingly live in harmony, especially since the relationship is also sexually satisfying and both partners are keen, that is at least until the day when . . . By creating the illusion of distance, the novelist excels at showing that, despite their very real success, these couples lack credibility, even in their own eyes.

Gordimer is obviously at a time in her life when this problem preoccupies her, even though she does not have a clear answer to what constitutes a couple and on what its longevity can be based. The relationship between Liz and Graham is not that of husband and wife, but the novel specifies that it could certainly be so, should Liz want that, and that this would change nothing on a social level. In reality, their relationship is probably as ordinary as can be, at a time when married couples are becoming something of a rarity. They represent the average person

in average situations, a favourite topic for Gordimer, and in line with the theories on the novel expounded by her model, Lukàcs. In this sense, the relationship in which she puts her characters allows her to analyse what being a couple truly means in general terms, and to show that the satisfactory functioning which characterises a couple of this kind, is just too plausible to be convincing, too predictable, and (one might surmise) perhaps simply too distanced from the folly that is crucial to love.

In this representation of the couple, Gordimer has obviously chosen to portray the woman's point of view through her female narrator, and thus the critical gaze will fall on Graham. Not on Graham's nature *per se*, for the problem is just that this 'nature' does not exist at all, or barely so, but Graham as a type. This enables the analysis to be fixed at a limited level of generalisation, in this case the white South African male, and it is through Graham that Gordimer is able to speak just as much of a mentality inherent in her country as of life as a couple. The description of Graham is based on his banality, the surrounding banality, that of the ordinary white South African male who can only survive by conforming in every regard. In all likelihood, Gordimer would be willing to classify this man as a 'bastard' in the Sartrian sense, even though he is nothing of the sort in the current, defamatory meaning of the word. He is inevitably a bastard, from the moment he no longer feels he has a right to intervene in order to change the world, nor even to judge it.

The problem, as it appears to Liz, is to discover what possibilities exist for the white man in South Africa, between, on the one hand, political activism as exemplified by hard-line Stalinist Communism, and on the other, the relative comfort of the role of the 'bastard'. *The Late Bourgeois World* is a masculine representation of the feminine definition portrayed in *A World of Strangers* through the descriptions of Cecil and Anna. It is evident that, by passing from a male to a female narrator, Gordimer has given herself the means to handle the second panel of the diptych. It allows her not only to complete her depiction of a society but also to enumerate noticeable gender differences which are displayed in differing reactions to the same political regime and its degrading consequences.

When she described Cecil in *A World of Strangers*, Gordimer made us aware of the immense anxiety that haunts such a woman and causes her to act only for her own security. Graham, on the other hand, does not suffer from anxiety, but rather from a kind of apathy which renders him incapable of seeing the problematic aspects of the situation in which he is living. Through these two variants, the male and the female, Gordimer paints a relatively complete portrait of white South Africans in the Fifties and Sixties, and implies that, if these pictures are only sketchy, it is because they do not deserve more in-depth treatment. It is what she adds to the tableau of society that is probably the true subject of her novel, that is, the consequences for Liz of Graham's personality, or rather lack of it. In this way, it is clear just how important Liz is to Gordimer, as opposed to Toby, who likable though he may be, is relegated to a utilitarian role.

In *The Late Bourgeois World*, Gordimer's interest lies in the ambiguities that characterise the life of a young woman such as the narrator. In fact, Liz is in a dual position: she is both a woman with a man in her life, and a single woman who must cope with life's challenges alone. It would not be right to minimise the former aspect any more than Liz herself does; indeed, she evokes the pleasures of her sex life very convincingly. However, the importance that Gordimer places upon the second aspect, that is, Liz's loneliness when faced with day to day responsibilities or additional ones, shows that she is moving towards what will become a major theme in her writing, played out in a number of variations until it rises to a crescendo in the novel with the meaningful title of *None to Accompany me* (1994). Indeed, this solitude is also represented in an ambiguous manner; although it is not exempt from a certain distress (in spite of Gordimer's extreme discretion in this respect), it also generates a free space approached only hesitatingly by the main character.

In this novel, as in *A World of Strangers*, it is a black man who reveals this potential liberty and affords it the opportunity of expression. In a brief moment in Liz's life there is, in fact, a third male character who appears, in the form of Luke, an African man who works for the black underground movement. Luke appears only sporadically in Liz's life when there is something he wants from her, usually money, but on this

occasion his request is more serious. It necessitates that Liz become much more involved; she may have to channel large sums of money for the black cause through her personal bank account. Liz hesitates, although she has discovered fairly early on that, should she wish to, she has the means to do what is asked of her.

The main significance of this episode is to show how (and why) a woman like Liz would suddenly choose to become personally involved in politics, knowing full well the dangers. Yet this significance exists only insofar as it is impossible to explain Liz's motives clearly, motives that she herself presents as being negative in that there are no underlying reasons to justify how she chooses to act. Herein lies the strength of the first-person narrative, which explains no more than the narrator herself does, imposing her own hesitations and refusals on the reader. Yet this refusal of all explanation is in itself significant, and incorporates the episode with Luke into the whole of the political stance expressed in the novel.

The only thing that Liz affirms with any certainty, or even conviction, is that she will not comply with Luke's request out of a militant conscience, that is, the notion that she is truly serving a worthwhile cause. Not that the cause is not a good one, this is not what is being called into question. The rejection that Gordimer wishes to engage in is obviously of a different nature and is at the heart of any definition of her writings as being politically committed.

What is occurring in Liz's mind when she eventually moves towards her decision in a fairly decisive manner? It is certainly not thoughts of the pros and cons, the risks and what is at stake. On the contrary, it is a multi-faceted reflection stretching far beyond the actual matter at hand. This reflection focuses largely on death, although curiously not Max's. Rather, Liz has difficulty accepting the fact that her grandmother, who is eighty-seven years old, lives in a retirement home where nothing is being done to prepare her for the inevitable end. Added to this contemplation are thoughts of a very different and diverse nature about whether man can escape the finiteness of his condition by conquering space, as the Americans walking on the moon have just been seen on the front page

of every South African newspaper. It would be simplistic to suggest that a logical train of thought, the result of private and public issues, moves between these different but simultaneous leitmotifs in Liz's mind. At the very most, one could say that her internal contemplations project her into space and time in a way which relativises the decision she will make, whereas socio-political pressure weighs heavily upon her.

It is precisely because such thoughts are not capable of providing sufficient arguments that Liz feels free and wants to use her freedom positively by saying yes. The only valid response in the face of death is to take risks that open up new ground – each in his own way and according to his means. By crossing a forbidden line, defined as intangible by her social class, Liz, in her own way, is walking in space and setting foot on the moon.

The vastness of death and space are not treated by Liz as abstract philosophical domains but, on the contrary, are approached through concrete, almost anecdotal, situations. It is also because Liz's political involvement is born of a particular, isolated circumstance that it seems acceptable to her, whereas she is repelled by abstract idealism. One could say that her actions are personalised, in that she is acting at the request of a particular individual, Luke, who, as a black man, has a personal reason for political involvement. Far from invalidating both act and decision, this factor serves as a guarantee – at least as a guarantee of authenticity, if not validity. As can be expected, Gordimer does not call into question the validity of the black cause; rather, what is at issue here is the authenticity of the commitment. It is a difficult issue as it requires a judgement call – and a personal one at that – since what real authenticity can there be for a white South African man (or woman) who breaks the law of the land, thereby provoking the indignation, mistrust and hatred of their peers? Gordimer's position, expressed here through her female narrator, can be contrasted with André Malraux's 'lyrical illusion', a term used by Malraux in the knowledge that this is what led to the Republican defeat in the Spanish Civil War. Gordimer does not challenge participation in the Struggle any more than Malraux disputes joining the International Brigades. Yet, she notes that the kind of tragedy that she has encountered personally all

around her lies within this contradiction and paradox. By taking the path of novelistic imagination and giving her characters freedom, somehow or other, she must attempt to elude this tragedy, without downplaying the tragic feeling which gives substance to the problems and internal tensions in her novels.

In this way the novel, situated as it is in concrete history, acts as a surrogate tragedy and creates a free space for its characters. By pledging her allegiance to political militancy, Liz would lose the feeling of acting freely and for herself. It is true that she is helped or guided in the discovery of this demanding position (which could also be judged as paradoxical) by the counter-example of poor Max, from whom she more or less consciously draws inspiration.

Had Gordimer not guarded against it, Liz could be considered as merely falling unknowingly under the control of another man, as ultimately obeying Luke's request, 'because it was him', and as accepting his request because the emotions or feelings that he evokes in her are imperatives which a woman obeys. Gordimer obviously knows this kind of militant motivation to be one to which women, in particular, often succumb, and that is why she cannot neglect to explore such territory. Her book, here as elsewhere, makes suggestions that the reader is free to follow if desired.

Liz is not stupid, and anyway what she feels for Luke is not overwhelming, passionate love. She does not forget for a second that he has come to see her because he needs her, because he has something very specific to ask of her. And nor does Luke make any attempt to gloss over this. To say that she accepts out of love would be completely puerile, and if it were only a matter of sleeping with him, this would be possible, whatever her decision. What is revealed here is the astonishing maturity that Liz is in the process of acquiring, which is mainly the result of her now direct experience of what must be called mortality, rather than death. In fact, the memory of a conversation that she had with Max on the subject becomes intertwined in the immediate pleasure of a delicious meal and good wine that she shares with Luke, although this does not influence the way in which she accepts his request, or experiences her relationship

with him: 'While it went down, warm as the temperature of the room, black-red, matt as fresh milk on the back of my tongue, I thought of how once – long ago, at the beginning – I said to Max, what would one do if somebody you loved died, how did one know how to go on? I always remember what he said: "Well, after even only a few hours, you get thirsty, and you want again – you want a drink of water . . ."' (1966, 67).

With split-vision, Liz sees herself savouring an excellent dinner with Luke, shortly after learning about Max's suicide. This is a lesson about entry into adulthood and the perception of life without idealism, that is, without illusions but also with a breadth of vision that is impossible unless one contemplates death. That is why it is important for death to be present from the outset in the book's title, *The Late Bourgeois World*. The book signifies that real life, or real commitment, only starts on the other side of this experience or awareness. And if there is potential freedom, it is also from this point onwards that it begins.

The freedom that Liz puts into play in her decision is linked to the status of her life as a woman and to the novelist's possible feminism in this novel. Gordimer is interested in Liz as a woman, all the more so because, as always, she gives herself the possibility of moving from a specific case to analyses of a more general nature. However, the word 'feminism' is so laden with connotations that some of these must be eliminated before proceeding further.

As far as the women in *The Late Bourgeois World* are concerned, there is neither denunciation of their plight nor demands. It would be unthinkable to say that Liz, or any other female character for that matter, is a victim, not even Liz's grandmother, who is the unhappiest person in the book after Max. This is because old age and death escape gender boundaries, which is already a response, perhaps the most important one, to the feminist issue. Liz is not a victim, but there are a certain number of difficulties and dissatisfactions in her life which stem undeniably from her position as a woman.

One needs to look farther than to Liz's first marriage at an early age. It appears that despite Max's 'revolutionary' involvement, Liz has endured forms of exclusion practised in traditional marriages, and that she has

been confined to his private life, barely cognisant of the full implications of her husband's militant actions. This is both disturbing and too much, had she not wanted it, but too little, had she craved involvement in this type of action. The least that can be said is that, in other ways, Max has been neither a loyal nor a tactful husband. Yet here too, Gordimer takes a stand by treating this casually, as if it were commonplace. She focuses more on what occurs after the divorce, when Liz finds herself alone with the responsibility of looking after her child. Gordimer does not say that this role, which many find burdensome, is difficult or disagreeable. However, she infers that it is fraught with ambiguity, which the circumstances in the novel clearly demonstrate, and that women, as mothers, are inevitably alienated. Liz cannot escape the fact that her relationship with her son is, in fact, a three-way relationship in which the third party is the image of his absent father, something which is perhaps especially true when the child is a boy. Whether she wants to or not, she is forced to construct a viable image of this man, with whom she long ago ceased all contact, for her son's sake (children have subtle ways of making demands): a visible or readable image, decipherable and digestible. This is one of the limitations that weighs upon her supposed freedom.

The characteristic of the so-called single woman is to have to satisfy constantly demands and pressures that men in the same situation seem to experience much less, as if men long ago succeeded in imposing respect for their autonomy. On this point, the perception that can be drawn from *The Late Bourgeois World* joins with numerous feminist-inspired testimonies. Perhaps because of some personal guilt, the so-called single woman is pulled in all directions by forebears and descendents, parents, grandparents and children. The white adult woman must also defend herself continually on several fronts as various demands are made of her, and in particular, it is when she decides to carry on regardless that she is prey to different forms of latent guilt.

Given the above, what of Liz's personal life, meaning her love life and emotions? It is understood that the comfort and solace that Graham brings to Liz are precious, even though she is under no illusions about the superficial nature of their relationship. Although the issue of Liz's

professional life is not tackled in this short novel, it can be presumed that, here too, Gordimer would side with the feminist position. The responsibilities and guilt that weigh upon the single woman constitute a sufficient handicap to explain certain 'setbacks' that women face when asserting themselves. Gordimer does not make any statement about her character, so one can assume that Liz herself does not feel this way. However, it is possible that this situation, which has nothing of the dramatic about it, motivates the response that Liz will give to Luke, whereby she will take part in the underground movement in her own way. It could be that the motivation which helps her to make up her mind is actually the conscious or subconscious desire to carry out a strictly personal, free act which those closest to her will not even know about. It will be a certain way of existing which she has never known up until now. By throwing herself into the unknown, she differentiates herself radically from her lover Graham and the way of life that they share. By acting for herself, without needing the framework of a political party, she differentiates herself just as much from her ex-husband Max. By acceding to Luke's request, she knows perfectly well that there is no risk of her being absorbed or assimilated by him, as he only wishes to make use of her in an isolated capacity. Moreover, the way in which he uses her actually necessitates that there be no relationship between them and that she retain her autonomy.

In the South African context portrayed by Gordimer, white men seem to have very little room to manoeuvre, and the novelist's trust lies more with the women because of what could be termed their 'forced creativity'. They have to invent their living, not in a material sense, but in the existential sense of the word**,** because they have no pre-established means of existence other than their second-class involvement in a world that has long been manipulated by men. In the bourgeois world, the women have learnt to take advantage of their subjugation. Divorce has become a way out of that world, but at a heavy price. Thereafter, it is not easy to find anything other than modified forms of subjugation. Militancy, even (or especially) within the communist movement, was an all-male affair, defined by men, which is also one of the reasons why Gordimer is

extremely wary of communism. However, everything can be invented in situations that are imposed by what we call History, including the weapons that each man or woman takes up to confront these situations.

The Late Bourgeois World deals only with an isolated matter of limited importance; indeed Liz herself is a woman of both limited ambition and scope. This short novel does not aim to be a brilliantly expansive exercise; rather, it cautiously and unpretentiously looks to break new ground on the ruins of communism and the traditional bourgeois family. In May 1968, in Western democracies, those ruins were soon ablaze with burning utopian desire. In the 1960s South Africans too began to take risks, knowing only too well what life was like under a repressive regime. After historical events like the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960, there was a move towards minimalism, and Gordimer's novel is an example of this. Yet it would soon be proven that in another world, on the moon – and for once this expression is to be taken in its literal sense – imagination *could* become reality. It was an event that would in the long term encourage risk-taking, even if, like Neil Armstrong, it would mean taking only 'one small step' at a time.

2

Forty Years On

'We know that we have to perform what Flaubert called "the most difficult and the most exciting task of them all: transformation". This is the reality of freedom. This is the great matter.'[1]

Nadine Gordimer's works are a journey through time. The historical evolution of her country, which is at the heart of her writing, allows us to speak of culmination: the result of the fight against apartheid and the formation of a new South African state at the beginning of the 1990s.

Some of Gordimer's readers have perhaps wondered if she would continue writing after this event. Her reply came in the form of two novels focusing on this new South African society. The first, *None to Accompany Me*, serves as a link with the previous era and recounts the story of a woman's life from the Second World War until 1994, when the novel was published.

The second novel, *The House Gun* (1998), is set entirely in the New South Africa, a country which is dominated politically and socially by the blacks.

The journey comes to an end forty years after our starting point. Clearly, one can envisage Gordimer's own story throughout these forty years in her country's history. Yet she has stayed far away from the autobiographical novel and has continued to vary the ways in which she tells her stories – sometimes long-term, sometimes a limited incident but always multifaceted.

Gordimer's early novels describe a society that is characterised by obstacles, whereas now her depiction is of a society characterised by

uncertainty. The threads of her fiction benefit from evolution in her novelistic technique and are woven into a very rich patchwork. However, this richness means that it is just as necessary now as it was in the past to examine the substance of this fabric. The configuration of the opposing forces of blacks and whites, and of men and women, which are still very much present at the end of the journey, requires analysis.

None to Accompany Me

None to Accompany Me appears to be both an assessment and a culmination because it is not only the most complete novel in chronological terms but is also the closest to the development of Gordimer's own life. The heroine, Vera Stark, is approximately the same age as the author. Like Gordimer, she must have been born in the early 1920s, as she was still very young when her husband served as a soldier in Egypt during the Second World War. The novel begins forty-five years later, probably around 1986 or 1987 and develops over a number of years, covering the early Nineties and the establishment of a new political regime in a South Africa liberated from apartheid. As is often the case with her novels, Gordimer stops her account at the very moment in physical time that precedes the publication of the book. Amazingly, the period of time covered by the story coincides almost exactly with the author's own life. It does not follow that the situations and characters are of autobiographical origin, but one does wonder, when analysing the feelings or reactions of her female protagonist, whether Gordimer had to draw upon her most direct source of experience, her own life. This could explain how she has been able to approach her female protagonist at a moment in her life that does not appear in either *The Late Bourgeois World* or *Burger's Daughter*, both of which have white female characters. This moment (which begins with a woman of about sixty and ends with her in her seventies at the threshold of the unknown) is very rarely explored in the world of fiction. Through the use of flashbacks, which give the story an amazingly rich and complex composition, the reader can follow Vera Stark's life (about fifty years, which unfold entirely in South Africa), from her adolescent lovers and first marriage interrupted by the war, up to the gradual but

inevitable decay of her second marriage. In terms of basic landmarks, the novel stretches from the Second World War to the end of a century, or, in the South African context, from the beginnings of apartheid until after its demise.

The value of this novel lies in its dual viewpoint: that of a woman ensnared in a relationship with her partner and family, and a country caught in its evolution and undergoing a transformation that is as much feared as eagerly anticipated.

With the character of the white woman, Vera Stark, Gordimer has once again erred on the side of relative normality. Outwardly, there is nothing out of the ordinary about this woman; her journey is representative because it is so average – two marriages and only one lover who truly mattered, married life with a family, the birth of two children (a boy and a girl) who in turn become parents, the physical and psychological separation from the children, and the onset of old age, which brings with it, as is often the case, the acceptance of a certain amount of loneliness. However, Gordimer has reached a period in her writing when this relative normality interests her; she is keen to develop it, and her in-depth analysis renders it safe from clichés. As French director Jean-Luc Godard's film states, 'A woman is a woman', which is what can be said about Vera. There is nothing astonishing about a young bride who cannot endure the absence of her husband during the war, and who replaces him with a superb lover. Nor is there anything astonishing about being married to Ben, the lover, and having an extramarital affair with another man fifteen years her junior. Gordimer indulges in the following generalisation: 'If Ben had taught her that the possibilities of eroticism were beyond the experience with one man, then this meant that the total experience of love-making did not end with him' (1994, 61). Although Vera accuses herself of being a 'bitch' (1994, 67) when, sated from love-making with her lover, she still finds pleasure in making love with Ben, Gordimer's intention is not to take the reader into the mysteries of erotic perversion. On the contrary, she is emphasising, with tongue in cheek, that this is what female sexuality is like in those moments when a woman is in a position to experience intense, even infinite, pleasure. Gordimer's conception

of the novel owes much to Lukàcs; it is classical in its portrayal of individual life, while overarched by the author's representation of contemporary social and political life.

Gordimer's novelistic approach consists of telling the story of South Africa, the country in which her heroine's destiny is inscribed, by choosing a particular line of attack that is linked to a crucial issue. In a way, Vera can be seen as the continuation of Liz, taking the protagonist beyond the boundaries of *The Late Bourgeois World*. The first part of Vera's life, up until the birth of her daughter Annick in about 1958, takes place exclusively outside the political arena. Her involvement with politics begins when the path taken by the ANC diverged sharply from that of communism, and when, led by Verwoerd, Afrikaner Nationalism became a powerful force in the country.

The novel clearly emphasises the conflict that arises between Afrikaner farmers and rural black farm workers. Tertius Odendaal, an Afrikaner farmer whose grandfather was a Boer general, continues the fight in a different way by holding on to his three farms. He is ready to use any means necessary to defend these from the invasion of black squatters, and even attempts to call on the government to assist him legally. This is how Vera becomes involved, because she now works for a legal foundation assisting black communities in the fight against forced population displacements. By highlighting conflict over land occupation, Gordimer broaches a key issue of increasing importance as the end of the Struggle approaches. Increasingly, the whites have come to believe that the blacks have only one goal, encapsulated in the brutal saying 'voetsek', whilst according to the blacks, nothing will be done until they have regained the land that was once taken from their ancestors. It is in this context that Zeph Rapulana first appears; he is an extremely capable, reserved, and very determined black man. At first, Vera sees him only as someone who can help her in negotiating with Tertius Odendaal, but Zeph's character grows ever more powerful as he comes to symbolise a new class of blacks who know surprisingly well where they are headed. Violence may not always be avoidable, but, despite appearances to the contrary, this new class of blacks is better able to keep violence under control.

From an historical perspective, Gordimer's book centres on the moment when the fall of apartheid was imminent, a moment when exiles were slowly returning home and preparations were being made for the new political regime. The novel provides the reader with an extremely accurate, first-hand testimony of this historical watershed, particularly in the pivotal year of 1990, which provided fertile ground for upheaval in both black and white communities.

Far from being excluded from this radical political transformation, Vera now works as a member of the Technical Committee on Constitutional Issues, which obviously plays an essential role in defining the *modus operandi* of the new regime. Her life is completely dominated by intensely passionate, political debates where much is at stake, '. . . there was nothing either felt more intensely than these political fears and exploitations . . . this is the year when the old life comes to an end' (1994, 297). Yet, given Vera's previous choices, her present behaviour is maybe only a once-off.

What then to make of the relationships between blacks and whites in these uncertain times? Where does Gordimer place herself in the inevitable ideological debate: will the New South Africa be a place where the blacks finally take their revenge? Will the whites be capable of changing in order to get through the difficult period that awaits them?

Gordimer refuses to pose these questions in purely racial terms, adopting instead a complex position: whilst she does not deny the fact that this is a victory for the blacks, she also points out that an entirely new society is being formed, one in which the blacks stand to lose as well as gain, and not just take triumphant revenge.

The blacks to whom Vera is closest are her old friends, Sibongile and Didymus Maqoma, a couple who spent several years in exile while continuing their work as activists overseas. In the novel they have just returned to South Africa, and are beginning the process of reintegration into the highest levels of the political arena. The description of them that emerges from the novel is both accurate and understated.

Activists like the Maqomas have a past that is well-established, and their political skills and brilliant intellectual abilities set them among the much sought-after individuals most needed by the country. Of the two,

Sibongile is the more active and assertive; this is primarily because of her very strong character. Even her friend Vera remarks that to see Sally, one first has to get past her secretary. Sally is undoubtedly a rising star; Didy is definitely not, and this disparity between them becomes increasingly obvious. The results of the elections for the Movement's new National Executive clearly demonstrate this: Sally is elected, but Didy is not. The analyses that Gordimer delivers here contribute to her general analysis of the marital couple. Yet, with regard to Didy, the novelist also makes a political observation on the difficulties that blacks may face when adjusting to their victory.

In all likelihood, this issue interests Gordimer because it involves part of the paradox that she detects at the heart of South African life. She has already tackled this issue when dealing with the effects of independence in other African countries. The short story entitled 'At the Rendezvous of Victory' in *Something Out There* is an apt example. In the story, we see how a black man, known as General Grant, a well-known, popular figure in the military fight against colonial power, is unable to find a place or play a role in the newly formed black government. There is nothing left for him to do but make it clear that his country is now in the hands of neo-colonialists and to drown his sorrows in orgies and alcohol. Didymus is a man of infinitely stronger character, and he is far from sinking to those depths. However, he is depressed because of his own insightfulness: he feels that as 'one of the old guard' (1994, 79) he no longer has a place in the present. The political direction that his country takes disappoints his revolutionary ideals; he is bitter and passive.

As the other partner in the couple, Sally is diametrically opposed to Didymus; she jet-sets around the world, resolving both personal problems and those of her country with extraordinary brilliance. Perhaps her efficiency in both areas has a flipside. Outwardly, Sally is determinedly imperturbable but there is a price to pay: she is a stranger to her husband, who, contrastingly, is sensitive and so feels hurt. Gordimer's assessment of the unique destiny of black activists picks up on the subject of her previous book, *My Son's Story*. Here, too, it emerges that although South Africa's rapid evolution has brought about remarkable emancipation for

women, their husbands have long since used up their credit and so are having trouble keeping afloat.

However, as demonstrated by the character of Zeph Rapulana, from now on a whole new generation of black male politicians will play a role in deciding the political direction of the country. Vera herself is struck by the composure that Zeph displays in confronting Tertius Odendaal. Zeph proves to be a great help; it is as if he knows that he will win in the end and so they can all trust that things will turn out well. In fact, Zeph Rapulana acts more like the squatters' leader than a negotiator, and the outcome of his actions proves to be extremely positive for the blacks, who eventually win their case against Odendaal.

It is a positive result for the blacks in general and for Rapulana in particular, as this success leads to him acquiring a cottage in the suburbs. His upward mobility is unobtrusive, and so he can soon move into a house left empty by the departure of a white couple. One of Zeph's main qualities is to be around when he is needed most; this is how he eventually accompanies Vera to the funeral of her young colleague just when she has none to accompany her, hence the book's title. This is the symbolic weakness of those who should have been there, and the no less symbolic replacement of these cowards by someone who, henceforth, will play a big role, not only in Vera's life, but above all in the formation of the new country. Unlike Sibongile, who makes herself known in spectacular fashion, Rapulana is behind the scenes, researching into institutions that will be crucial for the future exercise of power. He acts within the framework of the Technical Commission, on which Vera sits, but it seems that their roles are inverted and that, from now on, he is the 'user' and she the 'used'. Whatever his true role, Zeph chooses to keep his private life an impenetrable mystery in order to respond more effectively to the powerful calling of politics, and, in all likelihood, the promise of power.

Zeph Rapulana's quiet diplomacy allows Gordimer to move the focal point of the novel to the realm of the unexpected. Although Gordimer is depicting the enormous transformation in black/white relations under the new regime, this is not the focus of the novel, as she yet again refuses to take the easy way out.

To oversimplify somewhat, the start of the 1990s is the moment when the blacks take over from the whites in South Africa. It is clear that this substitution is not the main idea to emerge from *None to Accompany Me*, quite simply because Vera, a white woman and the female protagonist of the novel, stays in place right until the end of the story and does not show any intention of moving.

However, Gordimer does give the reader a few indications that make it possible to place the novel within its well-known historical context. Furthermore, her ironic style of writing is manifest in the rather caustic tone that she uses to explore these dramatic turnarounds. For example, at one point during a party, a black woman who is married to a white is heard to say, 'Don't you know I'm his passport? I'm his credentials as a white foreigner. Because he can produce me, it means he's on the right side. That gets him in everywhere' (1994, 145).

On several occasions in the novel, Gordimer also demonstrates the fact that whites are unacceptably and inappropriately holding on to their former positions; they are still protected by the power inherent in the prejudice that they once used to victimise others. Gordimer speaks of this 'extrasensory' power of being white, which feels like 'a secret ability to bend metal by looking at it' (1994, 109). Thus, it is not evident that, upon coming to power, the predominant, immediate reflex of the blacks will be to take revenge on the whites. On the other hand, what is clear is that many blacks are haunted by the fear that it will indeed be a case of revenge, so much so that the responsible, cognisant blacks find themselves addressing this matter in an attempt to be reassuring, but without any guarantee of success. Hence Zeph Rapulana addresses the Afrikaner farmer, Tertius Odendaal, in terms which the latter no doubt sees as being ambiguous, even insulting, but which are actually testimony of the black man's sincere wish for appeasement: 'Meneer Odendaal, don't be afraid. We won't harm you. Not you or your wife and children' (1994, 25). The possible danger is that such words could seem to Odendaal like unbearable insolence. It was in *A World of Strangers* that Gordimer first described the whites' fear; *None to Accompany Me* shows that it is still a major concern in South Africa.

Gordimer does not portray the blacks slowly moving into areas formerly reserved for whites as expropriation, because the latter have left of their own volition; nor does she present it as a takeover by the blacks, because they themselves do not seem to view this as a victory. In *None to Accompany Me*, the most specific description in this regard involves Oupa, Vera Stark's young clerk at the Foundation. This young man from the bush, who has spent time in prison because of some petty crime, is delighted to be moving into a 'white suburb'. What, however, becomes of this once-comfortable, if not luxurious, accommodation? Everything could have been done to fix it up, but instead the exact opposite occurs. Oupa feels obliged to shelter a family less fortunate than he, and the place gradually deteriorates, so much so that Vera, who at one time used the place herself, can scarcely recognise it. In this way, it is perhaps an overstatement to say that the blacks are moving into whites' houses; of course they aspire to this, but only the affluent blacks are actually able to do so. Even the gestures through which they mark their territory are more symbolic than real, naïve in view of the results, and touching because they enable the reader to understand the age-old experience of marginalisation. It would be simply grotesque to paint Oupa as a vengeful black ready to chase the whites out of their homes. He is only a poor boy who will die without having ever known the most basic comforts; added to this, his wife and children still live in the bush, with little hope of ever leaving.

For all this, Gordimer does not, of course, describe an ideal and peaceful transition, nor does she minimise black violence. Vera and Oupa actually fall prey to this violence while on an investigative tour that leads them, literally, off the beaten track. As ill luck would have it, Oupa dies because he does not receive prompt or adequate medical attention. It is pure chance that Vera does not die too, and it is likely that this would have added to the whites' psychosis despite that fact that the circumstances of the attack clearly demonstrate that the victims were not chosen on racial grounds. In fact, they were not chosen at all, because it was a robbery of the most primitive kind, committed for the theft of a few items as insignificant as a wristwatch. The danger is, then, extreme but the only official acknowledgement of such acts is an innocuous sentence on

the radio to the effect that 'acts of violence were committed in such and such a place'. The violence that is rife in South Africa is absurd, trivial and formidable, and its main victims are the poorest and most humble blacks.

Rape is amongst the most terrifying, often incomprehensible, acts of violence cited by Gordimer. Interestingly, although the novelist refers to it as a crime committed by blacks against whites, she also 'desexualises' the act itself, as opposed to stressing that its victims are women. Rape is not portrayed as a long-suppressed desire to possess the white woman in accordance with the theory which was commonplace in the decolonisation period. Instead, it is the use of the most basic and most easily accessible of all weapons, part of a man's body: 'The rape has nothing to do with desire; the penis is a gun like the gun held to a head, its discharge is a discharge of bullets' (1994, 111). It would be misguided to think that Gordimer is reassuring the reader; her analysis does not alter the fact that the reality of rape is hideous. However, what she does attempt to do is eradicate shadowy fears and do away with wild imaginings. The phantasmagorical fear of the rape of white women by black men has been much exploited, as this fantasy offers all the ambiguity of fascination and repulsion. On the African continent, racial differences have contributed to the development of a pornographic horror that feeds on few real facts and many imaginary fears. Gordimer's rejection of these platitudes is undeniably positive on a continent where these demons proliferate only too often. What needs to disappear from South African society, she says to the reader, are guns of all kinds, and the penis is one of them when it is used for rape. Indeed, it is this 'house gun' which in 1998 will give rise to the title of her next novel, a weapon that is all the more terrifying because all men carry it with them and can fire it at will. How can one be amazed by the fact that it is made use of in a situation of dire poverty, when every other weapon is out of reach? The introduction of the subconscious notion of desire adds nothing, and actually complicates a situation of basic brutality. Gordimer's message remains the same as it did in *A World of Strangers*: one must be able to face the facts head-on, in their obvious and blinding simplicity.

Among these very simple facts are those that Marx recognised in bourgeois society and which are continually present: the divide between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. One cannot speak about the blacks in the New South Africa without acknowledging that this society also functions along the same lines. *None to Accompany Me* contains as many poor and humble blacks as those who have moved up the social ladder. Sibongile Maqoma indisputably has no qualms about behaving like an upper-class lady for whom a hooligan is a hooligan, regardless of whether he is black or white. This explains her reaction upon finding out that her sixteen-year-old daughter, the precious and ravishing Mpho, is pregnant with Oupa's child. Of course Mpho is too young, and Oupa is a married man. Yet Sibongile's fury is mainly driven by the fact that he is a scoundrel, for whom she feels not even one iota of empathy. If she herself were not black, one might accuse her of racism because of the repugnant and contemptuous way in which she speaks about the young man.

Sally detests poverty, as the reader sees when the Maqomas are housed together with the other returned exiles in a shabby hotel reserved for the repatriated. Revolted by its filth and mediocrity, she can no longer bear to live there with Didy, and so asks her white friends, the Starks, to house them. Unhesitatingly, she chooses the white model, that of people who have financial resources, because it is the best and most comfortable. Once the blacks have access to money, it seems obvious to her to aspire to this model, regardless of the idealistic ravings of certain white liberals. Sibongile Maqoma's belief, which translates to 'riffraff will always be riffraff and there is no reason to be lenient towards them just because one is black', certainly represents the attitude of the new black bourgeoisie in power.

This example leads the reader to think that, in post-apartheid South Africa, Oupa's world will not be improved, not that this has been foreseen or desired by those in charge in the new government. Gordimer seems to be saying 'enough' to revolutionary illusions, which have now deserted her; it is time to look straight at the black bourgeoisie, who are as fascinating to the novelist's pen as the white bourgeoisie were to novelists for about two centuries. No, the bourgeois world is not dead, and with hindsight, the title of Gordimer's 1966 novel assumes an ironic meaning.

A Marxist would probably say that when you chase the bourgeois out the door, he comes in through the window. In South Africa, and in post-colonial countries in general, the bourgeoisie may change colour, but for those who are not part of it, or who are confined to its margins, life remains unchanged.

However, this is no reason to deny the significance of the changes experienced by many blacks, and it is certainly not unimportant that people like the Maqomas are in control of their country rather than in exile. There is indeed a redistribution of roles and functions within the black world, even if we take this to mean its influential minority. In addition to redistribution, there is real novelty, because of the appearance of 'younger comrades' (1994, 97). Zeph Rapulana is more than just a beneficiary of the new regime; it is truly created by him. Gordimer gives his character the task of warning us against overgeneralising the eternal opposition between the haves and the have-nots. Ignoring the fact that these words belong mostly to counter-revolutionaries or conservatives (a word which is part of Gordimer's vocabulary), such terms are simplistic because they do not take into account the most interesting changes: those which are subtle at first, yet prove definitive in the long term. Take, for example, Zeph Rapulana's promotion from former squatter leader (the illegal '*vuilgoed*' [1994, 25] in Tertius Odendaal's words) to distinguished expert in governmental affairs. Vera Stark is one example of a white who is somewhat overshadowed by the ascent of this black elite. One recalls what Rapulana said to Tertius Odendaal: 'Meneer Odendaal, don't be afraid. We won't harm you. Not you or your wife and children' (1994, 25). Vera often thinks of these words, so great an impression did they make upon her. Could it not be that, subconsciously, she is hearing these words said about herself – without the underlying menace that Tertius Odendaal perceived, but as the peaceful affirmation that an inescapable substitution is taking place.

There comes a moment when political regimes and people have run their course. Yet before assuming that this is the underlying lesson at the close of the book, one must remember that Gordimer enjoys flirting with the commonplace in order to better distance herself from it. If we are to

assess the last few moments that we see of Vera's life, in relation to Zeph's, they must be resituated within the long history of this woman, who insists, moreover, that this is only a temporary stage and not conclusive.

At the same time as society and State politics have been evolving, so too have the family and the couple. In *None to Accompany Me* two couples, one black and one white, are analysed. Yet another couple is also unexpectedly created, on this occasion homosexual, made up of two white women who adopt a black child and so become a family. All these events are concomitant and probably linked in a certain way, but above all they are linked in the most general sense to the societal changes that are occurring. It may be that values are able to change more quickly in a society that is undergoing such an important political transition.

As for the black couple, Didy and Sally, the reader already knows that the new situation could have disastrous consequences for them. Gordimer analyses the rage that Sally feels when she is elected but Didy is not. Ostensibly, it is because she is indignant at the injustice done to Didy, but it is really because she cannot freely express her own joy at being elected. A fault line thus forms in the couple's life, one that admittedly will not lead to a breakup at a time when they still live together, united by secrecy, exile and the same goal, but which is all the same a serious rift. After all, when two continents split from one another, each one drifts in its own direction in such a way that the distance between them grows ever larger. When Sibongile's name appears on a hit list, the couple regroups in the face of danger, although Gordimer makes it clear that this part of the story continues after the novel ends. The novelist intends to demonstrate how even a couple as solid as the Maqomas, who have spent several years working towards political transformation, is tossed about on the stormy seas of change.

Of course it is not purely fortuitous that in a couple like the Maqomas it is the woman, Sally, who benefits most from the situation. She is carried along by that general movement which, at the turn of the century, released an enormous amount of female intelligence and energy that had long been denied to the world. After so many years of repression and feelings of inferiority, women have accumulated a potential that is gushing out like

a flood after the dyke has broken. The feeling of regaining the legitimacy of which they have been so unfairly deprived helps women to assert themselves freely and without reserve now that they can, like people whose rights have finally been recognised. Sibongile is an example of those strong African women always evoked by historical tradition, literature and legends, but always as exceptions, who have broken out of the walls that have kept other women in their huts and at their grinding stones. These walls are a measure of the strength of the African woman. However, one does not start a revolution with impunity. Black South African women sometimes shared in the underground Struggle and exile of their husbands. Sibongile is obviously not alone in this respect. A man like Didy is much too honest to rebel against the consequences of such a fact. That is not to say that he adapts easily to the inequality brought about by Sibongile's rapid rise to power. Didy is caught between his revolutionary ideology, which is by definition feminist, and its opposing forces. These forces are not just what is simplistically called his traditional vision of the hierarchy within the marital couple, but are also questions which express a genuine identity crisis: what is there for him to do and does he still have a role to play? This is one reason why he feels himself to be 'one of the old guard' (1994, 79).

The roles that are to be defined within the couple relate to 'gender' issues because they are both socio-political and sexual, and are symptomatic of a physical reality. Sibongile confides in Vera that she no longer has the desire to sleep with Didymus, and anyway, would she have the time? For this part of her conjugal role, she substitutes an extreme vigilance in family matters, organising everything during her moments at home before disappearing again. The question of sex heralds a crisis within the marital couple and is undoubtedly representative of it, and the result of numerous different factors. Future historians may well say that the end of the twentieth century was characterised by an immense shift in values, but that the 'catching up' that the women accomplished was greater in places where they were most subjugated. South Africa had longer than other African countries to prepare itself for the removal of traditional hierarchies represented by the fall of apartheid. For women,

this event must, by definition, signify the defeat of a system founded upon their inferiority. Gordimer has already demonstrated this process at work in *My Son's Story*, but then the black woman had to remain covert in all respects, whereas Sibongile makes her power known in the public arena; it is a pleasure that she relishes.

The changes at work within the white couple are slightly different; they are less directly and visibly linked to political transformation, although they are not completely separate from it either. *None to Accompany Me* can be viewed as the failure of the white couple, because Vera and Ben eventually separate, after having happily spent much of their adult life together. The separation occurs in an amicable fashion; Ben leaves to visit their son in England and gradually one realises that he will not come back, nor will Vera join him overseas. Given the circumstances, the word 'failure' seems brutal, and yet . . . There is a separation all the same and one does wonder about the reason for it. Nothing could be less clear because the way that Ben and Vera have separated is not a break-up or a divorce; it is not even the result of explicit mutual consent. It is the emergence of a dual solitude that has been covertly at work for a long time.

In Proustian fashion, Gordimer demonstrates how the parties concerned have only a fleeting awareness of the process, in the form of sudden insights. It is thus that, at a time when she is still linked to Ben by all the force of family ties and married life, Vera perceives both Ben's solitude and the way in which it foreshadows her own. Passing the open doorway of a restaurant, she catches a glimpse of him sitting alone at a table, 'How could he look so solitary? Did all the years together mean nothing? A childish fear of abandon drained her . . . His loneliness was hers; not here, not now, but somewhere waiting' (1994, 71).

The Proustian nature of the scene is evident in the way in which a single, fleeting image can play havoc with the senses, and also in how this immediacy calls into question our conception of time. However, Gordimer carefully works this into the progression of her novel, foreshadowing the moment when, having left Ben altogether, Vera finds herself as lonely as he is. In fact, when this moment does come, their two

solitudes are one and the same and both express what occurs when something that used to exist is no longer – the effect of time.

There is, however, another possible interpretation for Vera's story and her relationships with men, which would be to maintain that she has exchanged her former partner for a new man, Zeph Rapulana. Yet, if Vera is indeed captivated by Zeph, it is precisely because her relationship with Zeph can never turn out like her past relationships with her two husbands or her lover. Then, feelings of love were based on the fulfilment of powerful sexual desire. This is not the case with Zeph, even though it is very difficult to determine whether a possible sexual relationship is part of the attraction that Vera feels for him. Moreover, as the situation is never described from Zeph's point of view, it is impossible to know his feelings on the matter. Whereas previously sex was very important in Vera's life, it would appear that she has not considered the question of sex with Zeph nor, *a fortiori*, has she mentioned it to him. They live on two separate parts of his property and only see one another to chat, which Vera greatly enjoys. Does she not want something more from the arrangement? This is a question that Gordimer only suggests at the end of the book, before leaving her heroine under the stars in the dead of night.

It is a furtive scene, as secretive as the moment when Vera recognised Ben sitting in the café. This time, while groping in the dark in search of a pair of pliers, she feels, rather than sees, the presence of another woman in Zeph's house. Vera unintentionally touches this woman's body, but both women remain silent. Whereas Zeph's sex life (or love life) has never been discussed, this incident is proof that it does exist, but discreetly, in line with the rest of his behaviour. But what does Vera think? What does she feel when she comes to this realisation? Despite the progress that she has made in overcoming old reactions like jealousy and frustration, there is a risk that now she might find herself right back at the beginning. The narrator leaves the reader to oscillate between two different realisations, the first being that this area is for those who do not know what progress means. The second realisation (and the one advanced in the novel) is that, in South Africa, old regimes have been replaced by

new ones, bringing with them new ways of life. Vera's and Zeph's relationship is placed entirely within the context of powerful renewal. Together, they experience the political exaltation of 1990, which creates an intimate bond between them, 'no emotion . . . could draw two individuals together more closely . . .' (1994, 72) and one can understand how the 'strong current of the present carries them headily' (1994, 72), and replaces other forms of attraction that in the past drew Vera towards men. When Gordimer evokes this moment, she exhibits a lyricism that is rarely found in her writing, and which is thus all the more powerful. History enables her characters to live with an exceptional intensity which cannot be trivialised.

Along with everything else that comes with this new era and new life, Vera's feelings for Zeph are not, and cannot be, named. What would be the point of asking whether the use of the word 'love' would be justified here? The fact is that, by accepting this attraction, to the point of (almost) moving in with Zeph, Vera feels that she has acted freely and in accordance with her wishes alone, 'An exaltation of solitude would come over her. It was connected with something else: a freedom; an attraction between her and a man that had no desire for the usual consummation' (1994, 306).

Like Liz in *The Late Bourgeois World*, Vera is searching for an act through which she can feel truly free. And despite the thirty years that have passed since then, such an act is still perceived as a transgression that nobody understands. Moreover, this is why Vera sets about it in a way that will avoid her having to explain her course of action. However, she does hope for tolerance, if not approval, from her daughter Annick, who does not shy away from the social transgression of lesbian life. Yet, even here, the paradox inherent in society resurfaces; it is still present within supposedly new ways of life, even though they claim to go beyond the contradictions of the old order.

In *None to Accompany Me*, Gordimer tackles the issue of homosexuality head-on in a comprehensive and unambiguous manner. This is demonstrated through the character of Annick, Vera and Ben's daughter, who arrives at their home one day with her girlfriend, Lou, without trying to hide the nature of their relationship. It is not a matter of provocation,

but rather stems from the young women's conviction that the traditional couple must be enlarged and diversified. It takes Ben a long time to understand or admit to Annick's homosexuality, but not Vera, who takes cognisance of it and clarifies the duality of her reaction in detail.

Over and above Vera's realisation that her daughter is lesbian, she acknowledges the appearance of a new family order – here is a real family because the two women quite naturally extend their conjugal relationship by adopting a child. However, before Vera observes the development of the new 'order' with its settling in and its conformism, with firmness and conviction she expresses at length her visceral attachment (the adjective is appropriate here) to heterosexual sexuality. It is tempting to attribute the conviction with which Vera speaks to Gordimer herself, as it appears to be a response to certain feminist positions on the subject. Moreover, in its own way, it is as lyrical as the act of faith heralding South Africa's arrival into a new era. Vera speaks about heterosexual sex(uality) in terms that are obviously neither crude nor shocking, as this would be contrary to the persuasiveness of her own argument, but with a precision that does not leave any doubt about, or place for, other practices. She loves to be penetrated by the man's penis; it is an indispensable part of her pleasure, as she explains to her daughter in a very passionate debate, 'Yes I love men. I mean exactly what I am saying: how can there be love-making without the penis?' (1994, 158). Since Gordimer's writings do not reveal a desire to subscribe to militant antifeminism, it is probably more accurate to interpret this as homage to what for many women is one of the greatest joys of their life, and which should not be denied, however much morals may evolve. Regardless of the need to combat 'male chauvinism', it would be tantamount to being ungrateful were women not to do justice to this 'marvellous entry' (1994, 158) which Vera describes.

Even if it is not Gordimer's intention to be controversial, the era in which she is writing incites her to put sexuality under the spotlight. Indeed, the joys that the woman derives from heterosexual sex are often, out of necessity, hidden in the discourse which denounces male domination. The novelist's concern here is not to be 'politically correct' but rather

to re-establish equality by reminding the reader of something that was, and still is, a marvellous source of pleasure for women. Yes, lesbians are entitled to affirm the legitimacy of their desires and, moreover, they have the right to have their relationships recognised as part of a set of socially acceptable practices. No, women are not always unhappy, frustrated or ill-treated in heterosexual relationships, and it would be extremely unfair to deny that many women find great fulfilment this way, and that the very idea of homosexuality seems unappealing and joyless to them.

By refusing to define femininity by the vagina, women put themselves in a position of inferiority with regard to men, who feel permitted to use audacious clichés about their sexuality when it suits them. If this is the advantage, then let each man and woman feel free to use the characteristics of their sex as they are traditionally defined: 'Why, if Renoir could say that he painted with his prick, has no woman ever had the guts to say I live by my vagina?' (1994, 161)

At a time when, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world, sexual differences are being redefined, Gordimer confronts one of the great debates of our age. Two generations of women are contrasted here, not because homosexual desire is a novelty, but so that the arguments in its favour should not lead to untruths. Just as one cannot avoid racism by refusing to say that a black is black and that a white is white, one cannot avoid sexism by denying the man his penis and the woman her vagina. This proselytism is annoying not only because it is a delusional waste of time, but also because it signifies a loss of pleasure, and, more seriously for Gordimer, a sacrifice of reason.

In *None to Accompany Me*, Gordimer's portrayal of Vera's sexual behaviour is a confirmation of what the novelist has said about sex(uality) in her writings prior to the novel. It makes up a collection of astonishing, even disturbing, variations on the subject. Sex is an autonomous domain; it is unpredictable because it is irrational, and, in the main, lacks any logical link of cause and effect with other behaviour. This is what makes it fascinating, but also extremely limited and unreliable.

Vera has proof of this very early on in her life when, right at the end of the Second World War, she and her first husband, now living in a hotel,

have been separated for two years. One day he visits her in what was formerly their joint home, to recover some possessions. In a completely unpremeditated act she decides to use this brief visit to make love to him for the last time, 'on the floor among the papers, not on the bed where she belonged with the lover now' (1994, 10). From a psychoanalytical point of view it is possible to explain and make sense of this behaviour. However, Vera herself cannot seem to understand it, which is why she has difficulty accepting the consequences. Doubt over the paternity of her son Ivan haunts her for the rest of her life: is he her ex-husband's or Ben's child? Such uncertainty has been part of the female condition for centuries; it is one of the variants of solitude experienced by a woman that can probably never be shared with anyone. Even the half-conscious complicity that Vera sometimes believes exists between her and her son, remains uncertain and problematic; it is part of the unreliability that sexuality involves.

Long after her second marriage to Ben, Vera has a two-year affair with Otto Abarbanel. Their relationship is a 'pact of desire' which owes all its strength to being the only bond between them. Vera experiences special, acutely intense moments with Otto. However, this is again something that she cannot discuss with anyone else, and instead of a memory, all that remains of those two years is a kind of nothingness that has no link to her extrinsic life. In an existential sense, sex is unlike anything else. It is a way of existing without past or future, so that it is pure fiction to base the foundations of a couple's life upon it, so markedly different are the two.

In *None to Accompany Me* the separation is twofold because it presents not only the unreality of a sexually united couple, but also the reality of a couple with no sex life at all. This is just one of the many paradoxes in Gordimer's writing: she attaches simultaneously so much and so little importance to sexuality, especially in the lives of her female characters.

Ben and Vera are the couple that become unreal; Vera and Zeph are the couple that take on a strange reality. Another couple also forms: that is Annick and Lou. It is through these three examples that Gordimer is able to continue her analyses of the couple, solitude and love.

As a couple, Vera and Ben's progression serves to deflate fixed beliefs, for example, the idea that a couple is either married or not married, and that both partners must be clear on this in their own minds. These are beliefs that have become obsolete, without those involved even themselves realising it. The difference between a couple and a non-couple is a lot less obvious than one might like to believe; Gordimer has already shown this throughout *A Guest of Honour*. In *None to Accompany Me*, she demonstrates how solitude operates, through Vera sensing loneliness at a time when the thought of separating from Ben has not even crossed her mind. Furthermore, Vera's relationship with Zeph is partly based on solitude and physical separation, that is, the absence of the marital couple in its traditional sense.

In the white society depicted in *None to Accompany Me*, there is only one couple who (for the most part) fits the traditional mould: Annick and Lou, the lesbian couple. This is another example of the quiet paradoxes inherent in Gordimer's writing and is evidently based on the novelist's own observations of contemporary reality. Can the same cliché used to refer to the bourgeoisie not be retained to describe the traditional couple, in that it disappears only in order to re-emerge, stronger than before, in the form of a new couple, reworked or expanded according to different needs? It seems that Annick and Lou have adopted the old familiar model from conviction, and not merely because they need to obtain official recognition. However, there is inevitably a rift between those who have nothing to prove and those who have everything to gain, particularly through playing the Establishment. It may be that the price to be paid for institutional progress is a certain amount of regression. Gordimer enjoys demonstrating this, moving conformism from Vera's generation towards that of her daughter Annick's.

When Vera confronts Annick and Lou during a week-long stay at their house, the reader realises that it is reality itself which is paradoxical. Although all the arrangements have been made for Vera to move in to the annexe of Zeph's house, she has decided to spend her holidays visiting her daughter. It is a symbolic confrontation: on the one hand, she has just sold the family house in which Ivan and Annick spent their childhood, on

the other, Annick and Lou have just bought a house to live in with their adopted baby daughter who will be the new focus of their lives. The timing could not be worse! Annick and Lou are dismayed; Annick asks her mother what other people will think of her and Vera gives up on trying to make her daughter understand her: 'By now we ought to have accepted that there are things about each other neither of us understands' (1994, 310).

It should be clear to the reader that Vera and Annick have exchanged roles. The former has abandoned the family home, so to speak, committing an age-old transgression which women have been, and still are, guilty of, whereas the latter, in line with no less established practice, has founded a home – not that this means it is necessarily of an entirely new kind, nor that it is merely a copy of the classical model. Is the mother perhaps less of a conformist? Is Vera freer than her Annick?

In fact, in *None to Accompany Me* it is a question which applies to the whole of South African society. Even though entire groups are acquiring a legitimacy previously denied to them, society will not necessarily evolve in the direction of individuals' greater freedom, as claimed by certain revolutionary statements. The optimism and progress symbolised by the process under way are undeniable, but some regression in revolutionary ideals within the functioning of the new State is only to be expected. The emergence of a black bourgeoisie is not only a source of satisfaction, but also of bitterness for the hard-line activists, as is proven by Didymus. The desire of both groups and individuals to become legitimate thus takes the form of a surprising mixture of audacity and attachment to the ancient model. When only the earliest foundations of a society exist, it is difficult to say who is advancing faster and towards what. The excesses and confusion encountered in the setting up of the new State are taken one stage further in Gordimer's next novel.

The House Gun

Published in 1998, *The House Gun* is Gordimer's testimony to the state of her country four years after the first democratic elections. It is a testimony

that immediately exposes individual and bloody violence: *The House Gun* is a gun which murders. It is no longer a question of inter-ethnic violence, with whites committing acts of violence against blacks, and vice versa, as was the case during the apartheid struggle. The murder that takes place in the novel, whereby a white man kills a fellow white, could be viewed as just another sensational Sunday paper headline, and testimony to private, as opposed to public, problems. That this crime falls within the realm of private life could be an indication that the nation is now 'at peace', or at least no worse off than any other 'peaceful' country. Without minimising her role, Gordimer can henceforth apply herself to so-called social issues.

Once the reader is aware of the nature of the crime in question, Gordimer hastens to specify that her aim has not been to write a detective story. She demonstrates the scope of her ambitions by placing the novel in the same sphere as those written by Dostoyevsky, an author whom Gordimer has always admired. Indeed, not only does *The House Gun* contain an extremely enlightening quotation taken from one of the Russian author's novels, but there is also a striking similarity between one of Gordimer's own characters, Natalie James, and Nastassia Philippovna, one of Dostoyevsky's characters. Moreover, the recognition of this likeness is essential in order to understand fully Gordimer's novel.

By drawing the quotation and her female character from Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, rather than from *Crime and Punishment*, Gordimer clearly distances herself from the detective story genre, even though the main action centres on the events around Duncan's trial. Duncan, a young twenty-seven-year-old white, has killed Carl Jesperson, also white, in rather complicated social circumstances. The allusion made to *The Idiot* demonstrates that, despite appearances, the focal point of *The House Gun* is not the identification of the guilty party, nor an attempt to understand Duncan's motives or the sentence handed down to him. Instead, it is a study of the relationships between certain characters, both male and female, one of whom will ultimately become a murderer, and another who will be his victim.

Does this mean that the crime could have occurred anywhere, and that the South African context is irrelevant? Knowing Gordimer, one can probably say, *a priori*, that this is not the case. She seems too implicated in what is taking place in her country to cut herself off from it at such a crucial moment. Indeed, one cannot attempt to understand the novel without the South African context appearing to be a decisive factor.

As a prologue to *The House Gun*, Gordimer has used a short sentence which brings together two of Dostoyevsky's terms in a slightly different way: 'The crime is the punishment.' This quotation, taken from the Israeli author Amos Oz's book *Fima*,[2] is perhaps an indication that Gordimer now feels herself to be in the same position as her Israeli colleague – within very close proximity of intense historical tragedies and recent political dramas, yet searching to understand guilt in a completely private context, on the margins of those great upheavals. Following on from organised death and the fight for survival, the relationship subtly becomes one that swings between the life-ethic and the death wish. Two voices conspire, one physical and the other psychological, to give these situations their own distinctive flavour.

Even though crime has long been rampant in South Africa (it was even considered crucial by warmongering anti-apartheid activists), it is clear that, for the individual, crime is not the same when it happens close to home. How, then, to return to the private sphere where guns must be excluded on principle? How does one get rid of guns once they are already in place, always within arm's reach, like the one in the title of the novel, *The House Gun*? Duncan commits the crime on 19 January 1996, when the final upheaval of the fall of apartheid and the establishment of the new regime is officially over. Does the residual violence justify Duncan's three young housemates possessing a weapon as deadly as a gun in their shared home? Gordimer's response is clearly no; it is obvious that, had the gun not been within reach, so inopportunely placed on a table in the room where Duncan encounters Carl, Duncan would not have murdered Carl, Carl would not be dead and there would be no tragedy. This, first and foremost, is what violence is about: the fact that guns are literally within everyone's reach.

Gordimer goes beyond this observation by analysing violence in South Africa in 1998 as a means of exploring the strangely unique relationship that people have with death. In South Africa, violence acts fundamentally as an obstacle to what could, and should, be the free creation of a new State. The potential for freedom exists, since freedom has now been won, but the suggestion is that people are resisting rather than embracing it. It is a violence that the country inflicts upon itself, Gordimer seems to be saying, and to understand this it is perhaps necessary to turn to analyses inspired by René Girard's epic novels, like *Violence and the Sacred.*[3] At the risk of oversimplification, the acts of violence taking place after the demise of apartheid appear to be ritual sacrifices designed to consecrate the foundations of the new country. Moreover, it is a well-known fact that there is no initiation ritual which does not involve the spilling of the victim's blood. From now on, those who live in the newly-founded country and reap its benefits, including peace, are (and will increasingly be) people who did not suffer violence in the past. They may well feel the unconscious need to repay a debt to the generations before them who toiled so hard for their sake; now they, in turn, must spill blood. Such a notion would give new meaning to the old adage 'an eye for an eye', which actually alludes to tribal vendettas, but which also makes it clear that the sudden suspension of violence (as in the case of a cease-fire), is illusory, at least with regard to the collective subconscious. The post-militant generation cannot simply enjoy peace with impunity. All the more so since in many newly-independent countries the youth are overwhelmed with heroic tales that feed the official cult of heroes who have the advantage of being dead. How can there not be a sense of shame or embarrassment, even frustration, at being a member of the disarmed generation, consigned to obsolescence and left to contemplate the weapons of the Ancestors? In this way, the freedom for which an entire generation has fought and sacrificed so many lives is almost immediately compromised, or, to use Gordimer's words, 'violence desecrates freedom' (1998, 81). If the cost of human life and the multitude of sacrifices made in the name of freedom are taken into account, then violence should be revered as sacred. Yet history does not always acquiesce to this logic; it

has often born witness to turbulent sequels and horrific consequences caused by a fascination with death.

At the time that Gordimer was writing *The House Gun*, there was a striking example of this fascination with death in the news: the polemic over the abolition of the death penalty. The abolitionists finally achieve their goal shortly after Duncan's sentencing, although this does not affect Duncan's position since he has already been sentenced to only seven years in prison. Given his admission of guilt, however, it is during his trial that the threat of being sentenced to death weighs heavily upon him and his anguished parents, Harald and Claudia. The distinctive meaning of the questions posed by Gordimer within the South African context is immediately evident. For years, South African men and women incurred the risk of capital punishment while defending the most legitimate of causes. After the triumph of the black cause and the liberation of its prisoners, it would have been logical to expect the abolition of the death penalty to be a top priority. Indeed, it is astonishing that, on the contrary, it takes some time for the issue to be raised, and when this finally happens, the death penalty is treated as a topic of frivolous dinnertime conversation. Yet beneath this superficial level, where nobody can actually imagine being in the place of the accused, lurks the pervasive presence of death, henceforth condemned to surface only on rare occasions.

It seems that in *The House Gun* Gordimer wants to broach a decisive issue in her country's history: the conflict between the life-ethic and the death wish. This conflict is played out every time an act of uncontrolled violence is committed. That is why it is necessary to reflect upon the issue of death and the different ways in which it is experienced, faced and dealt with. Somewhat paradoxically, it is those who are least acquainted with death, like Duncan's parents, who best understand it, as opposed to judges and lawyers, for whom it has become an all too familiar subject.

There is a marked change in our relationship with death which occurs when circumstances suddenly throw us together with those from whom we naively thought we were very different. Upon hearing the news that 'something terrible happened' (1998, 3), that a man is dead, killed in all

likelihood by their son, Duncan, Harald and Claudia are 'both at the same instant . . . touched by a live voltage of alarm' (1998, 4). Gordimer focuses particularly on the effect that the news has on Claudia, who, as a doctor, has an ongoing relationship with death. Yet within this customary, well-regulated relationship she is always on one side, 'protected' and 'outside [of] threat' (1998, 50), whilst on the other are those who must be comforted and reassured. Gordimer's analysis here is not very different from her previous novels dealing with apartheid and the poverty of the blacks as understood by white liberals. We also see this relationship at work in several of Gordimer's short stories, such as those in the collection *Jump and Other Stories*; both 'Comrades' and 'What Were You Dreaming?' focus on the inability to put oneself in another's shoes, whoever that person may be. Even with the best of intentions, a white bourgeois woman can only imagine what it is like to be black; she cannot experience 'in their place' what it is like to be them.

In the political arena, the only conceivable, significant change would be equal rights, that is, the concept that promotes equality for all in the eyes of the law. Outside of politics, however, there is only one concept that comes close to this: the equality of all in the face of death. Claudia is probably aware of the first concept, at least in theory, but she has certainly never thought of the second, which suddenly interrupts her life without warning: '. . . it's not just the just laws that have brought about this form of equality; [it is] something quite other' (1998, 17). It is not only Claudia, racked with confusion, who finds it immensely difficult to articulate this 'something' more precisely; most would find it impossible, save those who believe Montaigne's maxim that 'to philosophise is to learn how to die'.

Claudia's mental and emotional confusion is exacerbated by this being actually two deaths, or rather a double death. The first death has already taken place, that of Carl Jesperson, murdered by a bullet from a gun. The second death belongs to the uncertain realm of the future; it is the threat that the Lindgards cannot bear to contemplate, the menace of the death penalty if Duncan truly is found to be the murderer. Violent death is like a disease; it is contagious and infectious, from the minute that,

like Claudia, one can no longer remain 'outside [of] threat' (1998, 50). This is why, like the plague, it invokes holy terror.

By the same token, the Lindgards' first, instinctive reaction is one of rejection. Polite as they are, they are not welcoming to the messenger, Julian, who has the courage to inform them of the bad news. After this comes the furious refusal to believe what they already know to be true. Yet, above all, it is when Motsamaï, the lawyer, enters the scene, bringing with him the world of Justice, that the complex attitudes that exist in the face of death are revealed.

Motsamaï understands the case immediately; he does not doubt Duncan's guilt for a minute, nor does the lawyer have a problem entering into a relationship with him, knowing that by causing a death, the murderer has also demystified it. Motsamaï can thus speak freely with the accused, without needing to choose his words carefully. Yet this is certainly not the case for Harald and Claudia. Claudia, being less resigned than Harald, reacts particularly strongly; she has great difficulty in acknowledging that circumstances have made them dependent upon Motsamaï. However, it is first and foremost the way in which the lawyer speaks about death that she cannot abide, a word that he has rendered completely devoid of sacredness as if it were merely another detail. It has to be said that Motsamaï's brilliance and his astonishing eloquence allow him to juggle with death, a skill that is portrayed with considerable irony by Gordimer.

The advocate explains to Harald, the more approachable of the Lindgards, the line of defence that he will adopt to protect his client: 'the plea is "not guilty". That's the form. While we admit *material facts* which prove guilt . . .' (1998, 91). He goes on to explain the essential arguments that make up the plea, which proves to be particularly brilliant and effective when the time comes. Although convinced of their effectiveness, the reader cannot help but react somewhat like Claudia, for whom these '*material facts*' are an astonishing euphemism for the death of a man and the subject of obsessive, never-ending anguish.

This is what ensues when the trial begins, and death is, more than ever before, treated as a fact, or a collection of facts. It is obviously the Prosecutor's job to portray it as such, by choosing his words with the utmost

objectivity: 'You are charged with a crime of murder, in that you wrongfully and maliciously killed, on January 19th, 1996, Carl Jesperson. How do you plead?' (1998, 184). 'The End', one might be tempted to say, and yet this is only the beginning of a game between the Prosecutor and the Senior Counsel, which is both shocking and paradoxical. They are playing with a death – or deaths – from which they will derive not only profit, as they are professionals, but also an extremely narcissistic pleasure. This is particularly true in Motsamaï's case; even though his reputation is already well-established, his aim is to strengthen and improve it.

It is a disturbing and disheartening discovery for Duncan's parents, as they are unable to see the situation as anything but a tragedy. Claudia is in such a state that no one knows what she is feeling, and it is impossible to talk to her about it. Even Harald 'sees Motsamaï is enjoying himself, Duncan's life is material for a professional performance' (1998, 207). With a trial of this nature, Gordimer makes it clear that there is an incommensurable abyss between those who experience it as akin to death, given and received, and those for whom it is a marketplace in which to enjoy haggling over the price of the merchandise. The behaviour of the professionals in *The House Gun* is the subject of disillusioned conclusions: 'the defenders and the prosecutors come to a reasonable settlement on the price of a murder' (1998, 245). The word 'reasonable' in this sentence rings out like a provocation; surely death is precisely what cannot be accepted or understood by human reason?

However, the complex nature of Gordimer's novel also makes the reader think that perhaps human institutions are exactly where and how a necessary conduit can be created between the unthinkable, unacceptable and absurd and what can be humanly controlled, evaluated and adjusted. Life would then be a division between two incommensurable and yet coexistent domains: on the one hand, 'just laws', and on the other, the 'something quite other'. After the trial, it is possible to specify, at least partially, what constitutes this 'other'; in other words, what makes it possible to attach a value to life and to put a price on something that has none, for, as the saying goes, 'life is priceless'.

The trial is an attempt to transform life from essence and existence into a model that can be manipulated and integrated into a functioning system. With the trepidation of those who can be only on one side, Harald and Claudia witness the emotional and the metaphysical, both the subjective and the visceral. They see the trial process only as the reification of their son, his reduction to a collection of symbols comprehensible only through others' eyes, 'This is the model of their son put together, as a human being is comprised in X-ray plates and scans lit on a screen, by the dialectic method of a court . . .' (1998, 229). They are right: the court has succeeded in its objective of reducing the human being to a mere model. Moreover, by the end of the trial, death should no longer have a place in the courtroom, but will have been hidden under 'alembic formulae'. If this is the case when the verdict is handed down, then the professionals will have done their job well.

For the reader, Gordimer's critique of the trial takes on greater ambiguity because the process represents a very positive force in the fight against death. This is not only because the lawyer's arguments are compelling enough to procure an extremely moderate sentence, but also because it is a whole collection of life forces that finally prevail over the forces of death: 'But the verdict is not a shock; it is the delivery of dread that has been held – only just – at bay for many weeks and has been drawing closer and closer for the days in this place . . . waiting to be brought down upon them' (1998, 268). The trial is a place where anguish is kept at bay, and, as such, it belongs to the whole collection of life processes, of practices and procedures that seek to release the stranglehold exerted by the terror of death.

The reader's conception of the trial and its relationship with death is inverted in the course of the novel. This inversion is achieved both through the different paths taken by the main characters, each of which represent a particular type of relationship with death, and by the novel's prevailing message that life can eventually return to normal after tragedy.

In the novel, Duncan's girlfriend, Natalie James, is someone who has already faced the ordeal of death, and as such is a kind of 'living-dead'. In fact, she is portrayed by Motsamaï to the public as being at the root

of this tragic affair. Yet Gordimer shows us simultaneously both sides of the picture; on the one hand, there are very paltry, insubstantial reasons encouraging us to lay the blame upon Natalie, yet on the other hand, and at a different level, she is deeply implicated in the way in which Duncan has been driven to murder.

Duncan, who is Carl's boyfriend before he is Natalie's, finds Carl and Natalie having sex on the couch. Natalie leaves, and the next day Duncan murders Carl with a gun that is lying within arm's reach on a table. During the trial, when someone hisses, '*She's* the one who ought to be up for it'(1998, 197), the '*she*' refers not only to Natalie, but also to women in general, in line with the saying '*cherchez la femme*'. In other words, woman is responsible for man's original sin, and so one must 'look for the woman' in order to explain man's disastrous or inexplicable actions. This notion is so commonplace that Motsamaï does not hesitate to use it to underpin his argument. Behind the murder committed by Duncan is a pathological and destructive state which has been sustained by Natalie's manipulations. Motsamaï has the confidence to express this, 'Isn't this cynical coda the final, cruel afterword to the dance she led him, which evidence we shall place before this court describes as a life of hell' (1998, 196).

Over and above the trite and misogynistic argument so skilfully invoked by the lawyer, an attempt must be made to understand the very unique relationship that develops between Duncan and Natalie. It is precisely because of her intimate relationship with death that Natalie can exert such a profound influence upon Duncan. Her influence leads to a murder that, we soon realise is certainly not premeditated but comes from somewhere much deeper than a project consciously thought out in a single day or night.

Natalie has the unique quality of having sought out for herself close proximity to death. She had what Duncan describes as a 'nervous breakdown', brought on by a complicated set of decisions over whether to accept or reject the creation of a new life. Shortly after giving birth, Natalie chose to deny the gift of life by giving her baby up for adoption; later on, she was unsuccessful in getting her child back. It was after this

ordeal that Natalie tried to drown herself but was saved by Duncan, who was fortuitously nearby.

In different ways, and at different times, both Natalie and Duncan have given and taken life. It can be said that, by killing Carl and thereby seeking the close proximity to death that one normally flees from, Duncan is perhaps trying to make himself her equal. To Duncan, Natalie represents a challenge, as she is constantly pushing him towards a confrontation with death: not only did she have the courage to attempt suicide, but afterwards she sticks doggedly to her beliefs. Far from being grateful to him for saving her life, during the trial she criticises the rescue, declaring, 'I never had any comfort from Duncan. I don't know what he brought me back to life for' (1998, 190). Natalie invalidates Duncan's act and minimises its significance so that they both come to believe that there must be some different act which would alone have meaning. In traditional societies, such a deed would involve completing a rite of passage, like the initiation exploits performed by heroes of myths and fairy tales. In contemporary South African society, however, the act must involve the sacred and provoke holy terror, that is, the act of killing another. This is the horrific 'something quite other' which cannot be named.

Without realising it, Duncan has perhaps already been prepared for Natalie's message. Gordimer explains that one day, as a child on a school holiday camping trip, he wrote a letter to his parents telling them that one of the children had hanged himself. Moreover, in the letter he used exactly the same terminology as Julian Verster, the messenger who comes to inform Duncan's parents of the murder: 'Something terrible happened' (1998, 68). Perhaps, amongst the obscure reasons for an act of the kind committed by Duncan, seemingly beyond his control, one could cite childhood trauma. Whatever the case, as Natalie says, Duncan bears the mark of something terrible, something linked to death, which terrifies her even more than suicide, an act from which she did not recoil. A clear indication of this is seen in a quotation from Dostoyevsky that Duncan copied into the back of his notebook, justifying the similarity between Nastassia Philippovna in *The Idiot* and Natalie in *The House Gun*. Dostoyevsky's character, Rogozhin, the man who eventually murders Nastassia, says of

her: 'She would have drowned herself long ago if she had not had me; that's the truth. She doesn't do that because, perhaps, I am more dreadful than the water' (1998, 47). In copying out this quotation, Duncan must have identified with Rogozhin.

At other times too, the malignant, even suicidal, character of the relationship that unites Natalie and Duncan can be seen. Natalie says he chose her 'disastrously as she said she chose him' (1998, 153). It is their mutual death wish that keeps them together throughout what Motsamaï calls their 'descent into hell', a death wish that involves self-destruction as well as the destruction of others. Having already given herself over to death on one occasion, Natalie feels that she has nothing more to lose. Duncan's fixation with death is one of those perversions that he himself does not even understand, nor does he know where it will lead. As to the cause, Gordimer says, with regard to the child that hanged himself, '. . . no-one can know, for another, even your own child, what these destructives [*sic*], these primal despairs and drives are' (1998, 69). This is true for both the relationship between the Lindgards and their grown-up son, as well as for Duncan himself, caught between his own conscious and subconscious minds. Even he admits that he would be incapable of explaining to anyone why he committed the murder, as he does not know himself. This is why he feels that his parents' expectation of an explanation is naïve, and even pathetic: 'Of course he would never do such a thing. So that is why there is nothing to explain to those poor two when they come to sit with him in the visitors' room' (1998, 156).

Although both Duncan and his parents are incapable of providing any explanation, this does not stop the reader from reflecting upon why Duncan sided with death, as Marguerite Duras might have said. He is assisted in his quest by Natalie, who has come to know her 'saviour' very well in the course of their sometimes violent confrontations, which result from her attempts to break free from his clutches.

Natalie seeks to explain her own behaviour with concision because she has little hope of being followed by the public during the trial. In so doing, she highlights what seems to her to be Duncan's dominant characteristic, which is at the root of all their fights. He is a man who needs

everything to go according to plan, and, being an architect, he excels at this. Duncan 'likes to manipulate' (1998, 58); he does not tolerate people acting freely of their own volition, as this interferes with his own designs. The result is that those close to him, particularly the slightly perverse, feel impelled to use their liberty in a provocative fashion. Natalie and Carl are actually no more than just friends, particularly since Carl is gay. When the thought of sleeping together arises after a drinking session, it is just a fun, reckless idea. After all, they are seduced by the gratuitousness of the act, the 'why not? We are really free to do what we want'. Yet it is precisely this gratuitousness and freedom that Duncan cannot bear: the act takes place so openly, without any warning given or permission asked for; even Natalie and Carl did not anticipate it. For a control freak like Duncan, Carl and Natalie's unplanned behaviour is completely unacceptable. Since he cannot truly control them, what matters most to him is that he should know how they will behave. Both Carl and Natalie have already imposed limits on his authority, Carl by choosing to end their relationship, and Natalie by doing only as she pleases. However, Duncan has not been aware of this, and so could have started an argument or a fight with either one of them. By affirming their desire to take no notice of him, it is as if Duncan did not exist – they deny his existence. Moreover, it cannot even be said that they do this to provoke, as Duncan could very easily never have known about it. Incapable as he is of accepting their display of autonomy, Duncan loses all self-control, not because of sudden rage, but because he has been deprived of his identity and has no way of reaffirming his existence. The gun that he finds within arm's reach is only an illusory way of asserting himself so that they will have to 'take notice of him'.

In the end, Duncan unavoidably sides with death because he is completely lacking in the indispensable life skills of flexibility and adaptability. He does not know how to live, in the sense that 'to live' also involves letting others live. On the contrary, Duncan's solution is to impose harsh regulations on both himself and others, in such a way that, as Natalie remarks, he has gradually taken back the gift he presented to her when he saved her life. For, what does it mean to give life to someone

without giving freedom, other than it being a perverse action that will ultimately end in 'disaster', to use Duncan's words?

However, Duncan cannot kill Natalie. Although this cannot be fully explained, one senses that it would constitute a kind of unspoken taboo. To kill Natalie would be to invalidate his gesture in saving her, that is, it would be to deny himself. So, the only person whom Duncan can kill is Carl, whose (in)opportune presence enables Duncan to proceed very quickly towards the predicted disaster, which can be none other than the taking of a life.

Duncan does not say that it is Natalie's perverse and inflammatory behaviour that pushed him towards the crime. Much more fairly, he says, 'It was something made possible in me by her' (1998, 181). Motsamaï's understanding of the crime is given in his plea; it consists of evoking Carl and Natalie's desire to humiliate Duncan. Of course, the aim of Motsamaï's speech is to be effective rather than fair. The most solid approach still involves resorting to classic psychology, whereby behaviours are mechanistically explainable in terms of cause and effect. Yet this logic invalidates one of the most important aspects of human behaviour: timing. If this were indeed a *crime passionnel*, Duncan would have committed the murder the minute he found Carl and Natalie having sex; or else he would have done so the following day, as he did, but in a premeditated and systematic fashion, especially since it is in his nature to be organised.

In fact, one can only speak of cause and effect when using Duncan's own expression: Natalie 'made the crime possible within him', at least in theory. Unable to escape from this theory once it has entered his mind, headed straight for catastrophe and incapable of freedom, his own or others', Duncan is led into the trap by his own inflexibility.

Herein lies Gordimer's critique of the death wish and the regression of the life-ethic that occurs when life cannot come to terms with freedom within a free world. A parallel is established between Duncan's particular crime and the general crime that is rife in South Africa. It is not only a matter of the entire country coming to terms with its freedom, but also of each individual coming to terms with his individual freedom

within a free nation. There is, perhaps, nothing more difficult to do, when one has not been prepared for it. It is out of this serious incapacity that violence and death are born as a response to the anguish of uncertainty. Gordimer is indeed correct to say that *The House Gun* is not a detective story. Much more politicised than it appears to be, it is a *Bildungsroman* on a nationwide scale, albeit that vital education in freedom is portrayed through a single individual.

Even before the verdict is handed down, Duncan is aware of undergoing a kind of rite of passage that will allow him to live an effective and freer life in the future. As Natalie remarks so ironically, Duncan is an architect, and so can have all the plans that he was working on brought to the prison; this he does as a sign of hope and belief in the future. It is likely that his seven-year prison sentence will be greatly reduced for good behaviour, and that it will not be too difficult for Hamilton Motsamaï to obtain his client's early release. Yet, significantly, Duncan feels that he needs this experience in prison: his rite of passage must not be reduced too much, for fear it might be incomplete and ineffective.

In this regard, might Gordimer not perhaps be alluding to the politicians in her country, many of whom have spent time in prison, including the former President? There, they would have acquired a maturity and an education, in the fullest sense of the word, that would enable them to behave effectively and adapt to the realities of life. At the same time, just like Duncan before his ordeal, these political figures were perhaps at one time also inflexible, at least on an ideological level.

The limited framework of the novel hardly allows the reader to judge what will become of Duncan in the future. Gordimer's main indication in this regard takes the form of a message that is in symmetry with the novel's opening announcement delivered by Julian Verster. However, it is an inverse symmetry, as on this occasion the messenger makes Harald and Claudia very happy. The news that Khulu brings at this final point in the novel is steadfastly turned towards the future and towards life: it deals with Duncan and Natalie's child, with whom Natalie was pregnant during the trial. 'Duncan wants you to do something about the child' (1998, 288), says Khulu to the Lindgards. Their son is evidently siding

with life freely given. It could be said that this time Duncan wishes to exorcise death and salvage something from his destructive relationship with Natalie as a guarantee for the future. From the depths of his innermost thoughts it emerges that this gift of life must cancel out and equalise what was for him a gift of death, in the form of the murder, 'Carl's death and Natalie's child . . . they have become one for me . . . I've had to find a way to bring life and death together' (1998, 294).

If Gordimer were the type to favour happy endings, the birth of this child might serve as a confident prelude to the future, as is so often the case in novels. As promising as the future of South Africa may be, it is likely that transformation will be impossible without some casualties. Indeed, it is a matter of concern that women are not more often empowered to provide solutions. Natalie could well be one of those women for whom the hope of freedom remains uncertain, despite the convincingly lively hopes she expressed during the trial for the future of her yet unborn child. Knowing the pathetic circumstances in which she was deprived of her previous child, the reader feels the full force of her declaration to Harald, 'It's going to be my child, that's who it is, mine' (1998, 178). Moreover, knowing how much death and despair are part of her nature, this birth seems to be her only chance of survival, a kind of challenge to death, for which the stakes are immeasurably high.

Indeed, this is life or death for Natalie. And yet what occurs at the close of the novel is extremely disturbing; with great skill Gordimer makes the reader aware of a strange absence. Not only does Duncan speak of the child without any reference to its mother, but he does not take into account Natalie's affirmation of independence either. The reader is left to draw his own conclusions: has Natalie proved herself to be incapable of raising this child by herself as she would have liked? Has she understood, or even admitted, that the child belongs to both her and Duncan? Will she allow the Lindgards to assume temporarily the paternal role while Duncan is in prison? This oscillation between an optimistic and pessimistic interpretation of the facts is surely what Gordimer has in mind as she refuses to point the reader in any particular direction. Nevertheless, it is difficult not to worry about Natalie, especially since

the implied parallel between herself and Nastassia Philippovna in *The Idiot* is not conducive to optimism.

Not only is Natalie a young woman who has experienced profound adversity, but shamelessly, during Duncan's trial, everything possible was done to lay the blame on her. She hardly defended herself, nor did a single person speak up in her defence. On the whole, it was all in line with the traditional belief advanced by Hamilton Motsamaï: it was the 'wicked woman' who served as the scapegoat, the 'cynically cruel' woman who led Duncan a 'merciless dance'. This is the kind of melodramatic language that is used in soap operas to great effect on audiences. Natalie is undeniably the scapegoat; all the evidence had to be stacked against her for the lawyer to achieve what he termed his 'ambitious aim' (1998, 275). He does, in fact, achieve this: Duncan's prison sentence is limited to seven years. Knowing that Natalie was not facing a prison term, the lawyer used her unashamedly, probably reckoning that the harm she would suffer during the trial would be minimal compared to that endured by her partners Carl and Duncan.

Yet this type of reasoning does not take into account that, as proven by her suicide attempt, Natalie is a person who punishes herself in a way that is far worse than any punishment prescribed by law. She carries her punishment within herself, in her difficulty of being that first led her to sign her own death warrant. Whilst she did not suffer the rigours of the law, neither did she experience any of its benefits, in particular its ability to transform the unbearable into the bearable. In this regard, there is every reason to fear for her; unless Duncan's new state renders him capable of giving her the support which she (in vain) expected from him previously.

From now on, the question is whether Duncan will be capable of love, an element which was lacking in his relationships with Carl and Natalie. Duncan is an inadvertent witness to these two copulating; they seem to him to be almost like caricatures, as he evokes the 'hideous fit of their coupling' (1998, 155). However, it is in fact nothing other than an erotic act with which he is only too familiar, and as such, it is surprising that he is so shocked by it. Perhaps he realises that this act is just an act, and

nothing else, hopelessly nothing. It is a frenzied parody of love because it has no frame of reference. This 'infernal' vision, as Motsamaï describes it, is of the damned, of those who are incapable of love yet search in vain for it 'in the contortions' (1998, 155).

It is love, be it homosexual or not, which is at stake here. Ultimately, Gordimer leaves Duncan free to choose the sexuality that suits him, yet it is possible to speculate upon the meaning of his previous uncertainties in this regard. Duncan was first Carl's lover and then Natalie's; the only possible comment to be made is that he had been living in a state of indecision, not yet having discovered his identity, and would attach himself on to anyone who could bear his inflexible propensity to control others. Yet this was something that neither a man like Carl, nor a woman like Natalie, could endure. Gordimer seems to imply that in a case such as this one, the sexual preference of the individual is not a decisive factor, and it is clear that this is not an example of a 'homosexual crime'.

In his prison cell Duncan appears in all respects anxious to return to normality. He seems to feel that the gravity of his crime – murder – is enough of a deterrent to set him on the straight and narrow for the rest of his life. Yet, in Gordimer's previous novel, her reflections upon the lesbian couple, Annick and Lou, lead the reader to think that this type of couple will, providing they conform, henceforth represent the norm just as much as any other. This conformism rather suits Duncan's true character and is perhaps an advantage in a country that is in the process of transformation.

Having explored the heavy obligations of the New South Africa that are evident in the country's widespread criminality, Gordimer is also at pains to describe 'signals of life' (1998, 285). With enthusiasm and occasional humour, she scrutinises the character of Hamilton Motsamaï, a brilliant black lawyer who is representative of the success stories that are equally to be found in South African society. She also takes the opportunity of depicting a new kind of black/white relationship.

The word order used is important here; whereas previously it was a matter of the whites' relationship with blacks, seen through their eyes and attitudes, things have changed and now it is the inverse order that

is appropriate. Two examples of this new relationship in the novel, one minor, the other significant, conspire to suggest that the blacks feel a rather sad sort of compassion for the whites, and even endeavour to assist them when they are in obvious difficulty.

Nkululeko Dladla, known as Khulu, is the first example of one of these blacks. A journalist by profession, he perhaps judges it necessary to transmit both good and bad news. At any rate, throughout this terrible ordeal, he goes out of his way to be helpful to the Lindgards, instinctively choosing the least terrifying and most soothing words. When faced with their reactions, he manages to abstract himself completely from his personal feelings because of his natural ability to put himself in another's shoes. It is an ability that is rarely found other than in certain (mainly black) working-class milieus. A real affinity develops between the Lindgards and Khulu; he is their 'proxy son' replacing the child that they feel they have lost. Yet once the worst of the ordeal is over, Khulu is discreet enough to withdraw. The Lindgards find their son again, in prison of course, but this is seen only as a temporary setback and does not even stop their son from continuing his barely interrupted career. When Khulu does visit Harald and Claudia, it is because Duncan has asked them to do something for him, and were it not for this, he would probably not have visited. It is obvious, however, that the Lindgards are delighted to be reunited with Khulu and are free of any bad memories. The relationship between Khulu and the Lindgards has always been good, existing on that authentic level that allows people to communicate about the essential, without trivialities or embarrassment. Although the Lindgards' social and emotional life has been seriously disrupted, Khulu has saved them from possible loneliness. Khulu is the antithesis of someone like Duncan, who in Natalie's words 'is not able to give any comfort'. Indeed, at the risk of generalising, it could be said that, in a country where whites sometimes feel uncomfortable, they are only beginning to discover the touching kindness of the blacks and their ability to strike just the right chord. Conversely, one of the problems faced by whites is that, all too often, they are caught up in their own personal problems and do not know how to communicate spontaneously.

The Lindgards' main black ally throughout the trial is, of course, Hamilton Motsamaï, the brilliant lawyer who holds their son's life within his hands. A friend is able to supply Harald with information about Motsamaï, and although Gordimer remains discreet in this respect, the reader realises that the Lindgards really do need to be reassured. It is never openly stated that the Lindgards are concerned by the idea of a black lawyer. Instead, this fact is seen as part of the whole set of circumstances which shocked them at the very outset. In fact, Motsamaï's career trajectory is not out of the ordinary for a black of his generation, yet the reader senses that whites are not yet used to biographies in which an entire section, covering the apartheid years, is unknown to them.

Motsamaï, like many so many others, returned to South Africa in 1990 after a long period in exile in England during which, thanks to scholarships, he was able to complete his studies. The reader is made aware that, prior to this, his involvement in Youth Group political activity led to him being imprisoned for a certain period. Although this experience is certainly not the norm for lawyers in other countries, one can see how it might actually be beneficial, given the nature of the career. It is uncertain whether the Lindgards see it as being important in the fight that Motsamaï will have to reduce Duncan's prison term. Yet, they are told by Harald's friend that he is currently a much sought-after lawyer, and in fact, that 'the fellow's remarkable' (1998, 37); without his powerful personal skills, he would never have been able to establish such a name for himself in the profession so rapidly. Gordimer's renowned, lightly ironic tone is present throughout her remarkable portrayal of this 'superb' (her choice of word) persona.

This is not to say that Motsamaï is not brilliant. His talent is displayed during Duncan's trial, which was by no means easy; as he says to the Lindgards after the verdict, 'We couldn't have gotten away with less' (1998, 275). However, he is also the first to be convinced of his own abilities, and his entire attitude oozes his 'immense self-confidence' (1998, 39). Gordimer is obviously amused by the contrast between this man, who is so easily confident (and anxious that we be convinced of this fact), and the unfortunate Lindgards, of whom it would be an understatement to

say that they were ill at ease. In the slightly sadistic tone that Gordimer occasionally adopts, the novelist depicts the Lindgards in their misery whilst Motsamaï deploys a series of brilliant statements in their son's defence. Claudia is particularly exasperated by what she feels is a contradictory element in the lawyer; although his professionalism is evident, she is disgusted that he embellishes the facts and copes so effortlessly amidst horror. She probably also reacts badly to the kindly, even protective way in which he addresses them, and feels that his tone and glances contain 'the patronizing compassion of an adult who suspects a child of maybe not being entirely open to him' (1998, 114).

However, Motsamaï is only expressing a certain reality: yes, the Lindgards are dependent upon him, and yes, he is infinitely better than they at controlling the terrifying maelstrom that has been unleashed upon them. Moreover, it is clear that they have no choice but to put themselves in his hands because they are incapable of transforming their reticence towards him into objective arguments.

Over and above this particular situation, it is the new relationship between blacks and whites in South Africa, a country where blacks have at last come to power after centuries of white rule, which is at stake. Hamilton Motsamaï has a protective attitude towards the Lindgards because he feels that they are much weaker than he. There are a number of reasons for this, which their son's crime only serves to elucidate. Until this tragedy, their life flowed uninterrupted, like a long, quiet river. Given that Harald is fifty years old, the Lindgards' life seems to have been astonishingly far removed from any of the questions that one might expect to ask during half a century. Furthermore, this is unquestionably one of the reasons why Duncan behaves, in Natalie James's words, like a 'spoilt brat' (1998, 73): while he lived with his parents he never had to face anything 'adult'. To Motsamaï, the Lindgards seem like difficult children who, through no fault of their own, need to be helped towards maturity.

Through a curious reversal, it is the Lindgards who unexpectedly look like awkward and inexperienced guests on the day that Motsamaï invites them to a gathering at his house. Gordimer's narrative is explicit; this event signals a change in inter-ethnic relations, 'Harald and Claudia had

never been to a black man's home before' (1998, 165). These unprecedented situations are part and parcel of the New South Africa. From now on it is the blacks who are doing the whites a favour by inviting them to their homes. This is not a novelty, in the sense that this type of gesture was already well-established amongst the left wing. Previously, however, the gatherings always had political connotations, whereas on this occasion these are notably absent. It is an act of kindness and openness on Motsamaï's part; he feels rather sorry for his white clients, distraught and lonely as they are, in spite of their superior social status. Given the mindset of a modern man like Motsamaï, he would probably advocate that, whilst it is true that whites like the Lindgards never did anything for the blacks, one must be humane and not condemn them. Neither can the possibility be excluded that this gesture contains an element of self-esteem, or revenge, as the black man issues the invitation, and is, therefore, in a socially superior position. Yet perhaps Motsamaï really does wish to see whites like the Lindgards taking part in the new society for which he feels responsible. In 'A Soldier's Embrace', the short story taken from the collection of the same name, we see how the black protagonist, having just returned to his newly independent country from exile, is initially distant and condescending towards his white friends. Yet, when the white couple decides to emigrate, he is in tears, and perhaps feels guilty for not having done more to retain and integrate them into the new social order.

Gordimer presents a very balanced picture of potential 'revenge' and the substitution of a new black bourgeoisie for the established white one. Although there are characteristics which are common to the entire middle class (as is emphasised by the most affluent blacks moving into formerly white-owned houses), it is impossible to claim that this society has not changed profoundly. Even Harald, who is not the most insightful of observers, perceives these differences while at the lawyer's gathering. He expresses his feelings in the language of his own world, using notions such as 'compatibility' (1998, 169) and 'levels of education' (1998, 169), which are exactly the kind of concepts that the new social order would have us call into question. Yet, finally, the essential point that

emerges from his monologue, be it naïve or stilted, is that there might well be a revolution in South Africa. For, in fact, what other term could encapsulate this social intermingling that flouts age-old divisions? 'The different levels of education and sophistication at ease in the gathering were something that did not exist in the social life that Harald had known' (1998, 169).

Gordimer's uniquely ironic tone lies in what she implies to be Harald's confusion, in spite of his cautious objectivity and moderate judgements. He probably notices only the most basic of inequalities. Such is the nature of revolution; it sweeps away all former sophistication. For Harald and Claudia, this brush with 'another world' can only be beneficial, and Motsamaï acts wisely by giving them this opportunity, even if only for a few hours. Moreover, there is no other possibility for whites like them – this type of openness is the only answer.

'Out of something terrible something new' (1998, 279): although their son's ordeal was extremely difficult, the Lindgards have discovered a great deal by the end of it. Motsamaï must certainly have thought that they had much to learn. If the New South Africa succeeds in bringing people like the Lindgards and Motsamaï together, then something new will surely come into being, just like Duncan and Natalie's child.

This is an ancient mythological idea: from primordial violence comes life, and from chaos, a new order. The pervasive presence of death in the novel is perhaps, above all, symbolic of the death of the old order. The chaos that has been stirred up will eventually settle. The last word is Duncan's, who, at the end of the novel, says, 'I've had to find a way to bring death and life together' (1998, 294).

3

Man–Woman, Black–White: The Coexistence of Opposites

'There are two absolutes in my life. One is that racism is evil – human damnation in the Old Testament Sense [. . .]. The other is that a writer is a being in whose sensibility is fused what Lukàcs called the "duality of inwardness and outside world".'[1]

Gordimer's writing is sustained by an internal tension that is linked to her awareness of at least two primary paradoxes at work in the world in which she lives. The first is unique to the South African context, that is, the necessity that two groups as dissimilar and apart as blacks and whites should coexist within that country. The second paradox is a human one that is much more common; it is present wherever men and women wish to coexist, although they feel and know that they are very different. Within the universe that Gordimer creates to give form to the world that she knows, it is impossible to say which of these two coexistences serves as the model for the other: man and woman as a couple, or blacks and whites under apartheid (or the opposite of this – activism). The common factor is that, alongside these two forms of coexistence, there is no true smoothing out or complete obliteration of difference. Thus, the most devastating and dangerous thing would probably be to indulge in the myth of fusion, even though, like all myths, this might contain some basic truth. It would, however, be absurd to say that these same truths are testimony to failure, insofar as there is, for better or for worse, an actual coexistence in both instances. We shall now suggest

how, encapsulated in attempts at rejection or reconciliation, Gordimer arranges these differences in her great works of the Seventies and Eighties: *A Guest of Honour*, *The Conservationist*, *Burger's Daughter*, *July's People*, *A Sport of Nature* and *My Son's Story*.

Black and White Activism

> *'There was the violent urge to separation, and the counter urge it set up: the urge to move towards blacks, not alone as a matter of justice, but as a human imperative.'*[2]

The Conservationist

A good example of *de facto* separation between black and white society is found at the heart of the novel *The Conservationist*. The novel demonstrates the contradiction between an actual coexistence and the iron will to maintain separation. Gordimer labels the protagonist, Mehring, 'the conservationist' to emphasise implicitly that his dominant trait is dogmatism: the situation is what it is, and must not change. This attitude is, in fact, highly representative of a mentality widespread among white South Africans from the two groups who have decision-making power: wealthy industrialists and farm owners.

Mehring chooses to become a farmer, although he is first and foremost an industrialist and international businessman. It is in his role as a farmer that he has a direct relationship with the blacks who live and work on his farm, first on certain weekends and short breaks, and then during longer and more regular visits. Unlike his Afrikaner neighbours, Mehring has no farming background and so must discover its almost bewitching particularities while becoming increasingly distanced from the rest of his world. His life on the farm involves no human contact other than his relationship with the blacks, notably with Jacobus, the go-between for the black farm workers and their white master. It is an apparently insignificant relationship, but one which plays an increasingly major role in the novel.

The situation is characterised by the blacks being both omnipresent and yet deemed unworthy of any acknowledgment. For example, when Mehring decides to have some trees planted on his property, it is clear that the initiative and money come from his side, yet he does not seem to realise that the whole task would be impossible were it not for the work and maintenance carried out by the blacks. One could almost say that he considers them to be an extension of his own arms and totally dependent upon him. In this way, *The Conservationist* represents a starting point for the South African situation, even before the oppressive apartheid laws came into full force and engendered widespread racial conflict. In this corner of the Transvaal where Mehring has his farm – all of one hundred and sixty hectares of veld, fields and rivers – the relationship between the white boss and his black servants is rooted in tradition. It conforms to a model that goes so far back that its origins are unknown; one might even say that it is a happy relationship with only the odd point of friction between the giver and receiver of orders. Furthermore, even when Mehring notices some repeated lapses in the way that his instructions are carried out, he has the good taste not to get angry, having quickly grasped that this is part of the bigger picture of his presence-absence on the premises. Even if Jacobus has a special status which means he is both 'boss-boy' and obedient servant, his white boss is an irrefutable and respected authority. His occasional misdemeanours are tolerated; they are unimportant and a useful safety valve.

From this well-oiled efficiency, we can deduce that Mehring desires only one thing, that is, as his name suggests, to conserve the status quo. In contrast, Gordimer the novelist devotes herself to destabilising the situation. She does this both directly, by demonstrating the impossibly utopian nature of such a plan flawed with internal contradictions, and indirectly, through the intervention of other characters in the novel.

In actual fact, Mehring's role throughout the novel as the lackey of an unjust regime is constantly called into question by a character's voice that echoes incessantly in the protagonist's head. Although this character, his erstwhile mistress, has long since left his life, she used to harangue him endlessly during heated debates, accusing him of being a lazy, white

profiteer, whereas *she* supported the black cause. One cannot fail to be struck by the intense presence of this woman in the imaginary dialogue which occupies Mehring's thoughts. One is led to think that the dialogue is probably one of Mehring's memories, but also that he has maybe invented or changed parts of it. Moreover, it is significant that it is almost exclusively the female voice that can be heard in the dialogue, as if Mehring (in his determination to retain his opinions and way of life) were content to let her talk. Insofar as he is content to maintain the status quo, his is the good role and all speechifying is left to his interlocutor. This simple fact invalidates her at least partially: she is the speechifier contrasted with the man of action. Indifferent to, and weary of, a debate whose arguments are all too familiar to him, Mehring's role is to not try to defend himself against this woman's criticism.

However, Gordimer cunningly betrays Mehring; she implies that, deep down, he is not faithful to the persona he projects. The fact that the virtual dialogue with this woman occupies a much more important place than it should in the novel is highly indicative, and only too revealing. It is possible that these criticisms are unconsciously chipping away at Mehring, even though he believes himself to be unreservedly steadfast in his convictions. However much Mehring clings to his role of farmer, to his life on the land, and to the authority that he has over the blacks, he does not manage to free himself from the interminable inner debate in which he never has the upper hand – not that the woman necessarily does either. Logically speaking, this debate should seem a waste of time to Mehring, yet instead of dispensing with it altogether, he seems to need such deliberations. The debate with the woman operates as a driving force within him which motivates him to (re)act. His position is, then, neither clear nor logical because (in this debate which he did not initiate) it is he who must always reply to the woman's probing questions. By taking the opposing view to her constant haranguing, he acts purely ideologically. Mehring himself, though, would be the last to admit this: such a man believes that it is always other people, the 'talkers', who are ideologically driven.

Gradually, the reader becomes aware of this reversal; it serves to compensate for the rather unpleasant nature of the woman, whom Gordimer

conversely imbues with ideas that are close to her own heart. The inherent paradox of the book lies in the apparent penetration of the viewpoint of the 'other' (in this case the Conservationist) so as to force the reader to look himself for what makes the character fallible, even untenable. The novelist wants the reader to understand that annoyance at left-wing criticism is an easy reaction that is not without justification, but that the criticism itself is justified. In the end, it is the woman who stands firm on the side of a few, obviously embarrassing, obstinate truths that she treacherously repeats: apartheid cannot be justified by legislation, nor can the socio-economic system that stems from it claim any legitimacy. A man like Mehring is amassing his considerable wealth through the exploitation of black labour.

These truths are so incontrovertible that they need no reinforcement from a likeable character; that would be redundant. Suppose that, in addition to everything else, the critical woman were pleasant and emotionally moving, that she had to defend her views against a horrible character. This would certainly constitute that kind of 'didactic literature' which ensures that we love the defender of the just cause and, conversely, hate the evil lackey of the unjust cause. Yet Gordimer is too wise to try and make us think that it is like this in the real world. Were it so, it would be better to write a melodrama than a novel, and to show how justice triumphs, either because of its own worth, or through the transcendental intervention of some God who has not abandoned his people.

What in fact occurs in South Africa (a country whose perversities are well-known to Gordimer) is that the unjust cause can often seem the most pleasant and seductive, because of its 'human quality'. At the same time, the just cause, which is based on undeniable facts, appears paradoxically to be an ideological treatise, in all likelihood because it is reduced to a short, necessarily repetitive, discourse.

The critical woman is somewhat annoying, but how could she be anything else when we know her only through the intermediary of the Conservationist and his memories of her? Yet Gordimer, should she have wished, could have made us understand that this is objectively not the case. Nevertheless, the impression is that Gordimer turns this unflattering

portrayal to her own advantage. In her fictional character we recognise the archetypal left-wing intellectual woman who naïvely and fanatically gives in to provocation, the result of which is inevitable: by filling her house with blacks and white pastors preaching that Jesus was a revolutionary, this woman cannot fail to incur problems with the police. And what good comes of all this, because she is ultimately forced to leave the country, whilst Mehring obviously remains? This is not the only contradiction: after she has poured invective on the Conservationist because he is a man who can get anything and everything with money, she turns to this same man and his money for a lawyer, and then runs off without further ado.

Despite her intelligence and worthy ideas, she is, then, not a very appealing woman, proving that one can have just ideas, and yet not live up to them on a human level. White liberals go over to the black cause for a multitude of reasons, not all of which are of equal quality. The woman does not come up to the loftiness of her ideals, whereas Mehring is worth more than his ideas – a situation which makes their encounter truly interesting. Furthermore, it can be useful to know that ideas remain valid even when their partisans are not very trustworthy or likeable. Conversely, this means that conservationists and other characters with unacceptable ideas are not monsters but, on the contrary, may have worthy character traits, whereby rightful condemnation of them is purely political.

Inevitably, it is not enough just to be on good terms with black people to be a person who is truly deserving of praise, even though such an impossibility may be irksome. This is what is demonstrated by Mehring's life on the farm, a lifestyle that is much more fragile and endangered than he believes. Mehring's life is given over to solitude and muted pain which he seems unable to counter. His situation is steadily, but almost invisibly, imploding, in a way that is more convincing than any of the woman's arguments.

The cracks that threaten to break down Mehring's system and its boundaries in space and time, consist of a series of internal and external threats. The book opens enigmatically with external danger: when Mehring arrives on his farm, we learn that the body of an unknown black

man has been found and that it will be impossible to get rid of the cadaver. Gradually we ascertain that the dead man belonged to a migrant, marginalised population, and that he was from a nearby location where one hundred and fifty thousand people live crammed together. They have no place in the traditional way of life that Mehring wishes to conserve, and yet are there in their thousands, like threatening floodwaters that cannot be held back for much longer.

In the main, Mehring has spent his life in the city, overseas or on aeroplanes, and he feels instinctively that the unfortunate discovery of the body is a serious matter. His Afrikaner neighbours, who have lived on the land for several generations, are, however, acutely aware of the threat that this discovery presents. It is a thought which never leaves them and they are always on the alert, warning those around them, who are black, that they will shoot without hesitation at the first intrusion: a word to the wise is enough.

However, how can such a warning suffice, given the numeric disproportion between this one De Beer family and the sheer numbers of poor migrants who may decide to attack or rob them? Linked to the blacks who work on white-owned farms (for family or other reasons) are large numbers of unemployed, the result of economic crises or seasonal work cycles. These people are the main victims of the security situation: as the book demonstrates, cases of non-refunded money loans and insolvent debt lead them to murder amongst themselves. Other openly-threatened, potential crime victims are the Indians who have settled there as shopkeepers, and, as such, are also mixed up in the financial difficulties of the black population. Inevitably, the idea occurs to the debtors that this is all the Indians' fault, and that they must be driven out first because they are not from the area (a logic with potentially dire consequences).

The poverty in which the blacks live is a breeding ground for widespread racism. Such racism is not necessarily a matter of belief but is well-nigh inevitable, and an extremely dangerous outlet for everyone, including the whites. Conservatism is a mentality which consists of voluntarily blinding oneself to reality in the illusion that there will not be

a catastrophe so long as nothing is changed. It is true that it is an entire system which must be changed, but it would be false to believe that such a transformation does not need to happen.

Consciously or not, the white owners of the vast farms next to the overpopulated locations are living in a state of siege, even if the latent violence breaks out only on rare occasions. Courageously, Mehring accepts that the black man who was found and buried in his field foreshadows his own death, when his body will become one with the earth. However, he refuses to understand that this death allegory has a collective meaning and that it heralds the deterioration of a system unyielding in its own immobility. The notion of death is acutely present in the novel, and the Conservationist's morbid tendencies can be seen as symptomatic of suppression. And yet the idea that he suppresses is not that of his own death but, on the contrary, the mortal threat that is weighing on the world to which he belongs even in the solitude he has chosen. Not to want to see the world as it is, by refusing social invitations and dinners, for example, is simply another form of blindness. His self-chosen solitude is also perhaps the manifestation of an unconscious suicidal impulse, which in this case would correspond to experiencing the end of a world, that same world which the Conservationist claims to be upholding. The appeal of frivolous, wealthy white society which Mehring gives up when he comes to the farm undoubtedly wears thin. Yet it is very clear that a man of his class and wealth would not spend New Year's Eve drinking alone in the countryside without a valid reason, even if, or particularly because, he cannot explain this to himself.

What is happening to Mehring at this moment is even more worrying since solitude may well not be what is looking for; after all, he makes a half-serious, half-flippant arrangement to meet with Jacobus to celebrate the New Year. There is a slightly bizarre ambiguity about this which stems solely from the master's side, and not the servant's.

Jacobus does not come to this rendezvous because he could not have taken Mehring seriously; logically he has no reason to come as the invitation is implausible, and it would have been improper and naïve for him to have believed it. As for Mehring, although in all likelihood he was not

serious, when he finds himself alone, he is no less disappointed, helpless and bereft in his drunkenness. This demonstrates to what extent this apparently strong man is in fact destabilised, and contrasts with the immobility of his chosen role as conservationist. This reversal takes place insidiously, as if Mehring, unaccepting of a changing world, is ultimately brought to living out transformation.

Gordimer is enough of a moralist to see in this an example of the pathetic human ambition to establish an unchangeable empire in a perpetually changing world. Yet unlike abstract moralism, the empire to which she is referring, corresponds to a very specific kind of power which is particularly threatened because of its injustices and contradictions. Moreover, the most questionable power systems could be said to be those which claim to be eternal, in the same way that Nazism claimed that it would last for a thousand years. Mehring is at the heart of the contradiction on which political conservatism is based, and as such must be seen as its representative. It is because he feels gripped by death, that he projects his desire for immutability on to the socio-political system. His metaphysical aspiration (which implicitly assimilates the land and the blacks who work the land) is that, out of everything for which he has worked so hard, something will remain after him, just as the land itself will endure. Conservatism postulates that working the land in this way cannot change – it is age-old – but it does not take into account everything which invalidates this semblance of rationale.

Through living increasingly often on his farm, Mehring discovers that blacks are, in fact, individuals; but at the same time and contradictorily, he must ignore this and consider them as a whole, just part of the situation. His role is to maintain the system as it is; indeed, the blacks would not expect him to do otherwise. There is here some internal coherence, which means that an otherwise absurd situation can persist. However, Gordimer's novel demonstrates that even the Conservationist is tempted by the thought of a different kind of relationship between blacks and whites.

So it is that Mehring dreams that Jacobus comes to drink whisky with him on New Year's Eve. The date is symbolic: this meeting would be the

starting point for a new world. However, society is not ready yet; at least another twenty years must go by first. His dream is a transgression, utter fantasy: he and Jacobus would gel, and Jacobus would, of course, be on his own, without the other blacks, and able to abandon his family.

To put it trivially, Mehring is someone who wants to have his cake and eat it; he wants both the impeccable functioning of the system and something else which, being external to the system, can only undermine it and call it into question. Apartheid only exists through the limits it sets: it is a system based on segregation. In a half-confused, half-insightful way, Mehring feels subjectively that these limits are also limitations. However, he is not ready either to challenge or leave the system. He does not wish to go outside it, yet neither does he feel good within it, which is why he is distressed and existentially nowhere.

What does it mean when a Conservationist dreams of upsetting the very system that he is meant to uphold? Surely it would not lead to revolution, which is collective and needs more than the state of mind of separate individuals. Yet for this particular individual, the cracks are serious, if not irreparable: it is as though he self-destructs. Mehring is a tragic character, and should perhaps be seen as the scapegoat of apartheid – the sacrifice that allows the regime fed on human flesh to carry on a while longer. His tragedy is born of insurmountable contradictions which grind down those individuals unable to resolve them. This tragedy is, however, inscribed within an era and place, at a precise moment in history. This is why the tragic hero is a fictional character whose peculiarity is to be haunted vaguely by notions of eternity and the Absolute which he finds in the veld. As he sinks deeper into this, he becomes stuck there, which only makes the cracks within him widen. Observing this man who is not happy, even though he has every reason to be so, one wavers between a feeling of tragedy and something much more banal.

Burger's Daughter

With the aim of establishing a contrast with the Conservationist's attitude, Gordimer more frequently writes about those men and women who fight against apartheid and try to narrow the gap between blacks and

whites. These activists, known well to the author, believe in transformation and want to 'shake things up'. Gordimer is very close to them and at the same time acutely aware of the dangers occasionally inherent in their idealism. Her writing can be viewed both as an endorsement and a critique of activism. This applies particularly to communist activists who were among the first to reveal their support for black rights in South Africa. Interestingly, *Burger's Daughter*, which was published in 1979, traces three 'dialectic' movements within communism, first through the portrayal of Rosa's parents' generation, then that of Rosa's generation, and finally that of Rosa herself alongside the former two very distinct attitudes. Coming after *The Conservationist*, *Burger's Daughter* is an ambitious novel which does not merely contrast two political attitudes, but also demonstrates the need to take a long-term view of history (in this instance, two generations).

By the time Rosa becomes an adult, activism already has a long history. In order to understand what she feels in this regard, it is necessary to know what occurred previously. This is both because Rosa defines herself by what her parents were, and also because the political context itself has changed. Rather curiously, from an activist's standpoint, the novel is constructed like a vast vacuum between two plenums (the second of which, the doorway to the future, is merely touched upon), and spans almost a decade, from the end of the Sixties to the late Seventies.

As an activist, Burger's daughter, as her name indicates, is heiress to a weighty inheritance. Rosa Burger is her father's daughter, defined in the eyes of others by this filiation. However, the aim of the novel is to show that there is as much a break as there is continuity between these two generations. The very least that can be said is that, for as long as the novel follows her life, Rosa Burger does not take over her father's activities until his death in prison when she is about twenty years old. It is only right at the end of the novel, when we are told very briefly that she too is now in prison, that Rosa can be likened to her father. This is in spite of the fact that, after her parents' death, when she becomes the main protagonist, she affirms quite the contrary by refusing to follow in their footsteps.

Although her father has dedicated the whole of his life as a communist activist to the black cause, Rosa rejects all forms of underground activity, however minor. When Rosa's friend Claire asks her to steal the key to the photocopying room from her boss, Rosa refuses, even though Claire's parents were comrades in arms with her father Lionel. On a broader level, the book demonstrates through its two protagonists – father and daughter – the seriousness of the irreversible, generational divide that occurred among white South African liberals in the late Sixties and early Seventies.

In order to make this story clearly intelligible, Gordimer has had to be very precise in positioning her protagonists in time. This she achieves by freely drawing inspiration from a real-life persona, Bram Fischer, whom Gordimer chose as the subject of several of her essays before incorporating him into her fictional writing.

Here is what we know of Lionel Burger, the fictional counterpart of Bram Fischer. Born on 20 November 1905, he completed his studies in Pretoria and Johannesburg towards the end of the 1920s. In the early 1940s he and his first wife Colette were activists in the Communist Party. He had a son with Colette, whom he then left to marry Cathy on 19 August 1946, and two years later, in 1948, she gave birth to Rosa, or officially Rose-Marie. She was named Rosa after Rosa Luxemburg, but Marie after her Afrikaner grandmother. Lionel Burger's story follows closely that of the political struggle in South Africa. From 1950 onwards his militant activities went underground after the official dissolution of the Communist Party. In 1957, Lionel and Cathy were both charged in the Treason Trials. Prison stays played a large part in their lives. Indeed, the novel opens with a scene where we see Rosa at age fourteen, waiting amongst the crowd in front of the prison where her mother is being detained. This scene takes place in 1962, the same year that Nelson Mandela was arrested, two years before the Rivonia Trials which culminated with the nine accused being sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island, the penal colony that has since become famous as a result.

The whole of Rosa's adolescence is thus painfully and intimately marked by the effect political repression has on activists who, like her parents,

fight for the black cause. Her mother, Cathy, dies of multiple sclerosis and her father, sentenced to life imprisonment, dies in the second month of his third year in prison. In 1968, at the age of twenty, Rosa is alone, and even though she displays no outward sign of it, her distress is easily imagined; indeed, her close friends advise her to go either to Tanzania, a black African socialist country, or England, where she could join up with a number of fellow South Africans in exile.

Rosa, however, is not yet ready to make a decision of such magnitude; she must first stay to mourn the death of a loved one. Her father's death means so much more to her than simple emotional mourning and, aided by the general course of events, Rosa gradually becomes aware of this fact. For many of his generation, Lionel's death is also the death of a belief, a hope and an illusion – everything that communism stood for to a man like Lionel, a distinguished and exemplary representative of the best and most humanly admirable traits of the previous generation.

Burger's Daughter is less of an aggressive score-settling than a completely balanced analysis of what communism was, what it signified, the contribution it made, and above all, the dedication and sacrifices that were made in the name of certain ideas and actions. In this respect Gordimer's analysis in *Burger's Daughter* differs radically from that found in *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966). She takes into account what militant communism was for at least two decades (1948–1968) and is anxious to be fair, but also afraid for, and sympathetic towards what must be called a lost generation. She evokes both terror and pity, to use the Ancients' definition of tragic sentiment.

Lionel Burger dies in prison at least twenty years before the end of the anti-apartheid struggle. This could be the story of Moses, who was not given the chance to see the Promised Land towards which he led his people. And yet the story of South African communism is painful for another reason: the plan that ultimately succeeds is not really an extension of communist thinking and cannot be formulated as such. For a man like Lionel Burger, only communism could bring freedom to the blacks, as it should the world over. And yet we now know, in part thanks to the testimony of Gordimer's novels, that freedom has been obtained, not

through, or in the spirit of, communism, but as the result of political action which essentially has not been based upon an alliance between black consciousness and white class consciousness.

Gordimer is not prompting us to think that the immense sacrifice of human life and happiness was in vain. Beyond the measurable results achieved by Lionel Burger and his comrades, their importance is to create heroic role-models who keep hope alive and sustain the spirit of the struggle, particularly in black popular consciousness. However, among the communists there is also an alarming disparity between the ambition of theoretical aims and results achieved, between the inflexibility of rhetoric and the reality of concrete examples all too often ignored – and no one is in a better position than Rosa to experience this.

What emerges rather astonishingly from *Burger's Daughter* is the swiftness with which these communist activists become legendary and are historicised by the next generation, instead of sinking into obscurity. The acute political crisis experienced by South Africa over several decades brought with it the accelerated renewal of different forms of activism in line with fresh needs created by the decisions and actions of the government of the day. The urgency created by events such as the 1976 Soweto riots and Steve Biko's death in detention (September 1977), meant that the communist vocabulary of the 1950s and 1960s seemed inadequate, not to mention the loss of credibility experienced by communism on a global scale. Reflecting on the impact that the decline of communism has had all over the thinking world, it is easy to imagine the seriousness of the ensuing ideological rift in a country in the middle of a revolutionary struggle. *Burger's Daughter* is one of the great novels of our era, which will live on as the ultimate testimony to this tragedy. As Baudelaire writes in *The Beacons*,[3] great artists are the witnesses of their era because they do not follow events themselves but rather the effect on human sensitivity of those events and the weight of concomitant suffering.

What estranges Rosa from activism during almost a decade does not seem to be an objective judgement on the errors of communism. After all, she never expresses it in that way; it is more like turning away in embarrassment from a scene of suffering because nothing else can be done

to bring relief. Essentially, the break in her behaviour is not ideological because it is not the doing of an intellectual likely to call theory into question, nor is it an emotional response in the sense that Rosa is still very attached to the memory of her parents and to the friends who knew them. Content to live and act in her own way, at a slower pace and almost in suspense, this is a personal matter which she does not discuss with anyone. It is the early 1970s and everything happens as though she must 'hurry up and do nothing'.

By refusing to reflect on or define her position, Rosa chooses to focus on the immediate in life and almost tries to escape by projecting herself in time. In this respect she appears the opposite of political activists in general, but particularly of the communists whom she knows so closely, and for whom the Future is a key-word, charged with messianic connotations. For example, right up to his death Lionel lives for and speaks of the Future, a word which, to Rosa, is overused as a means of justification. On an existential level, her way of breaking with communism entails living in the present moment and eliminating the future from her thoughts and conversations. This acts as a healing mechanism and also makes up for the way she has lived for the last twenty years.

However, and particularly because the expression 'no future' was very popular at one time, it must be emphasised that Rosa does not interpret it as a desire for enjoyable, unrestrained pleasure. Overall, she is living in a state of grief necessary for her survival which, at best, appears as a type of lifelessness devoid of initiative or joy. Her mourning consists not only in saying goodbye to the memory of her parents, their thoughts and actions, but also, at a subconscious level, in not continuing their path. The struggle to which she instinctively dedicates what strength she has left is a struggle against imitation – the imitation of one's parents, which her friend Claire thinks is unavoidable, and the only option.

It is by refusing to give in to the family destiny that Rosa's activism is like her father's. To be the daughter of Lionel Burger is to carry on one's shoulders what in tragedy would be called the weight of destiny. But Rosa and Lionel are fictional characters who work against destiny, or try to change it, instead of going blindly towards it. Aware that no heritage is

cast in stone, they affirm a freedom that is relative, as is all freedom in this contingent world. The Burger that Lionel is could have been determined by his Afrikaner heritage, a fact evident in his surname: he could have behaved like the majority of his kind by clinging to a way of life created several centuries earlier. He could have claimed that 'what's bred in the bone will come out in the flesh'; this would have kept him away from communism as though it were an abomination. But, instead of clinging to his Afrikaner heritage, this Burger becomes Lionel Burger, defender of the blacks and anti-apartheid activist.

In this way, being Burger's daughter is not, as many might think, about imitating and continuing her father's activities. On the contrary, it is about having the courage to define herself freely against any such heritage. This brave choice is about *not* being heroic, and yet the meaning of 'Burger's daughter' changes again in the last thirty pages of the story when (despite having followed Rosa's life closely for such a long time) we hear news of a now-distant Rosa. It is as if she were someone whom we knew only by name, precisely because what we learn about her conforms to her name. It appears that after quite a long stay in Europe, Rosa Burger comes back to South Africa to work in a black hospital in order to rehabilitate the mutilated and injured; then together with many others, she is arrested on 19 October 1977 and detained in a women's prison where she still is at the close of the novel.

So that the break from Lionel and the previous generation should not be taken for granted, Gordimer has Rosa say: 'I don't know the ideology: It's about suffering. How to end suffering' (1979, 343–44). It would obviously be proof of obtuse anti-communism to imagine that Lionel Burger is driven by this ideology alone. His ideology is also inspired by suffering and the desire to put an end to it. Ideology is, however, an indispensable intermediary for organising and controlling the passage to action. And yet it has become clear that this intermediary is dangerous and responsible for introducing an element of perversion. And, at any rate, even when there is no perversion, ideology implies delay; this means that action is cut off from the essential qualities of spontaneity and responsiveness to what needs to be done.

Gordimer does not necessarily share the viewpoint that is adopted by Rosa and many others of her generation. Yet the novel makes it clear that this standpoint is in all likelihood the inevitable consequence of communism and its excesses. Burger's daughter acts for the same reasons as her father, but she does so in a different way. The consistency of apartheid repression means that for both father and daughter the consequences are the same, but the difference lies in the way they express their motivations.

Why is it that at the end of the novel Rosa is placed at a distance, seen in perspective as if integrated into the movement of history? It could be because Rosa trivialises her fight instead of idealising it and does not believe it appropriate to pass ideological comment on it, a discretion echoed by the novelist herself. The contrast with the militant communism of Lionel Burger and his friends is thus preserved because the latter could not be conceived without rhetoric (albeit sincere) about the Future, class consciousness, and so on. Upon learning that Rosa is one of the people arrested and imprisoned in October 1977, those who knew her father, both fans and critics, must have thought that 'what's bred in the bone will come out in the flesh'. After all, what happens to Rosa is not that surprising: she is Burger's daughter, it is predictable, even though she never made the headlines before. Yet the novel makes it clear to the reader that things are not quite as simple as that, and even if Rosa does behave like Lionel's daughter, she has none the less broken away from him.

Amongst the many mutations of white activism that occurred in South Africa, Gordimer finds one variation in particular to be very troubling, if her numerous essays are anything to go by. It is the fact that whites have now become the subject of extremely harsh criticism meted out by a virulent new generation of mistrustful blacks. This new, painfully provocative situation is depicted in a scene near the denouement of the novel.

During Rosa's childhood and adolescence people fought for the blacks because they were the powerless victims of white authority. Things have changed dramatically in just a decade, and because of this Rosa has to confront a situation that Lionel never faced, unthinkable as it would have

been for him. In the novel, this situation takes the extremely unpleasant form of verbal abuse which is inflicted upon Rosa. She is woken up by the telephone in the middle of the night: it is Baasie, her childhood companion, a sort of adopted brother who was taken in and raised like a son by Lionel Burger. Baasie's violent outburst is undeniably racist; Rosa is attacked for being a white woman, one of many who are generally accused: 'Whatever you whites touch, it's a take-over' (1979, 329). As might be expected, behind this broad accusation lies a very personal bitterness, fuelled by Baasie's feelings of rivalry and jealousy. It is serious because this rivalry is focused on the father, his character and his inheritance; it is a problem peculiar to the 'second generation'.

This incident takes place while Rosa is in London. Baasie cannot bear the thought that she has accepted an offer to speak about her father on English television. He feels that Rosa's speech contained a whole series of attitudes and presuppositions which he denounces in a violently sarcastic tone. One the one hand, he sees this as just another take-over: Lionel Burger was his father just as much as he was Rosa's, and English television could have interviewed him instead of Rosa, were whites not always chosen over blacks. On the other hand, and more generally, by joining the black cause, white activists like Lionel have chosen to be treated in the same way as black activists, so it is scandalous to cash in on them as heroic figures who will ultimately contribute to the greater glory of the white world. It is the blacks, and only the blacks, who should reap the benefits of what men like Lionel choose to do for them. Yet, fuelled by his drunkenness, Baasie unreservedly and contradictorily expresses another idea: the blacks do not have to be grateful to Lionel Burger and his kind, despite the pressure of those whites who want them to be grateful. This is in essence what they want to see on their English television screens, an idea so revolting that Baasie rants and raves on the telephone.

From the above it emerges that Baasie both objects to English television *and* wants to be chosen for the interview. He objects to Lionel Burger's importance *and* wants to be recognised as his son. Understandably, Rosa exhausts herself trying to counter this discourse with some common sense, but in vain. Neither logical argument nor emotional rea-

soning can have any effect on someone who is so much in denial and who is not actually seeking dialogue but rather just wants to 'get something off his chest', as the expression goes.

Gordimer does not make Baasie into a caricature. In fact, he is a real-life character: objectively he shows bad faith, but subjectively he clings as closely as possible to what he feels. And this is serious because Baasie does not pretend. Consumed with hatred, he expresses not only his personal feelings based on past incidents, the pain of which he constantly relives, but also a collective demand which we sense has been reformulated and refined several times.

Rosa cannot refuse to take his words seriously and see them as merely a drunken display, as her French friend later advises her to do. To her, this scene has the hallmark of a challenge, which indeed it is, as young blacks like Baasie practise provocation towards white liberals. It is a matter of forcing them to acknowledge that, contrary to what they claim, there is no alternative to a racial and racist policy in South Africa: blacks always have been, and *still* are being, treated in this way, and it is a dangerously hypocritical trap to let them believe that it could be otherwise. Those whites who claim to be liberals still have the consciousness of being white; they have not actually stopped acting like whites. The only possible response for blacks is the affirmation of black consciousness, as advocated by Steve Biko.

As unreasonable as this policy of making things worse may be whenever the only solution is a negotiated one, the source of the blacks' exasperation is only too clear. For years, white left-wingers have been repeating the same discourse – on how vital it is to go beyond the racial divide – but at the same time blacks have continued to be massacred simply because of the colour of their skin. How can one *not* think that this discourse is not only futile and ineffective, but also a dangerous illusion?

Rosa is so familiar with the South African situation that, shaken by the violence of Baasie's telephone call, she perceives all of this in a split second. At the same time, and without needing to reason or debate, she also finds the only possible response to what this provocation means. Given that it is the discourse of white liberals that has been called into question,

there is no point in adding to this by calmly trying to engage in fresh dialogue. Moreover, each of them has long known both questions and answers; these are now clichéd and practically unavoidable. The only way to put a stop to the tacit psychodrama is to refuse to be drawn into it at all.

In *Burger's Daughter*, the refusal to comment on or engage in new discourse is conveyed through an abrupt change of scenery: without warning the novelist transports us from London to South Africa. It is left to the reader to decipher where s/he is now and which place Rosa is talking about. Yes, Rosa has decided to return to her country and make herself useful in practical terms. In the hospital in which she works, she helps people to learn how to walk again. Although firmly rooted in reality, this is a symbolic occupation. The South Africa that people like Rosa strive for can only be built very gradually; people must learn how to move it forward with infinite patience in the same way that a person with motor disability is taught to walk: 'They put one foot before the other' (1979, 344). In all likelihood some of the patients are incurable, but others will learn one step at a time.

For Rosa, Baasie's telephone call serves as a catalyst, since unconscious, repressed thoughts were already driving her towards this point. Although less heroic than her father, Rosa's choice is no less difficult, particularly as it goes against some of the blacks themselves. This indicates that the two paths, black and white, continue to diverge even when there is a common destination. Indeed, how could this not be so, given that they come from different places and do not have to incur the same losses and gains? That Gordimer should clarify these differences, thereby reducing to a minimum any ambiguity in the shared struggle, is a healthy enterprise.

July's People

The major concern of white South Africans, whether acknowledged or not, is what will happen if and when the blacks take power. In her determination to examine this closely, Gordimer decides to make it the subject of her 1981 novel, *July's People*. An invented fictional situation allows her to bring about the famous reversal which is as much hoped for as feared: the blacks are in power, what will happen next?

No details are given of the takeover; it may be only temporary until order is restored, or possibly permanent. Nor is there any information given on what the blacks who have seized control intend to do with the whites, who (directionless) have begun to flee haphazardly. This is obviously not what interests Gordimer; these are purely political questions which the novel never intends to pose. On the contrary, the novelist endeavours to make the dual yet paradoxical aspect of the event as realistic and plausible as possible. On the one hand, the event conforms to the profound, almost obsessive fear that all whites, even the liberals, have long felt, and on the other, it catches them alarmingly unprepared, on the practical, mental and emotional levels.

The white protagonists of the book are the Smales, a middle-aged couple with three children; they are not highly politicised but have a fairly liberal outlook. It seems that they have thus far lived without feeling very involved in the fundamental conflict that provokes in others extremist, inflexible positions. They are not reckless people, especially since they have parental responsibilities. Nor are they stupid or narrow-minded, which means that they have imagined the possibility, even the likelihood of the event that occurs prior to the opening of the novel. And yet, despite all these factors that should have equipped them to deal with it, they are totally at sea. They are swept away by events, with no point of reference or means of protection. Everything happens as if this were some kind of unforeseeable catastrophe, like an earthquake that nobody could have predicted. The paradox of the South African situation in 1980 is that the whites of the country are incapable of taking stock of events which any sensible person knows to be both inescapable and imminent.

That Gordimer should acknowledge this is a validation of her work, and removes her book from the realm of the imagination to make of it the logical extension of reality. She focuses upon the past and present to project herself into the near future. In this she is conscious of accomplishing the task of all writers, what she calls the 'essential gesture'; this is based on the ability to pass from the real world into the novel without leaving the former behind but by making it visible and readable, both literally and figuratively.

It is, of course, astonishing that all of the author's talent was needed to create the situation depicted in *July's People*, Gordimer's eighth novel, not to mention her many short stories and other writings. However, it is precisely the opaque nature of historical reality for those who are living through it that is the subject of the book. This is over and above the story that is told of the strange adventure of the enforced cohabitation of a few blacks and whites (who represent a very ordinary cross section of the South African population).

It is remarkable, and in keeping with the South African situation, that a revolutionary, earth-shattering event must be imagined before such cohabitation can occur. On one side are Bam and Maureen Smales and their children; on the other are July, his wife and children, as well as their neighbours from the same village. Both sides are more or less the same age, and even if circumstances have brought them to lead separate lives, in the town or the countryside, the fact that there is an occasional meeting between the two only takes on mammoth proportions in a country divided by apartheid. The forbidden line cannot be crossed so simply; it must be broken by force. Gordimer cleverly chooses to demonstrate this in the most unexpected way: instead of showing us what is going on in the capital since the blacks have taken power and are in official positions, she shows us what occurs in a village where the white refugees are regarded as intruders by an unprepared black population!

The novelist's wit lies in the fact that by setting the novel in this way, she is emphasising the ironic denial with which events infuse the whites' anguished discourse. Although the situation has been reversed, the whites are once again the invaders, intruders who have come to take the place of others. They take refuge in the village of their black servant July, whose old mother has to move out of her hut in order to accommodate them. There is a cruelly comical fate in always being 'in the way', to use Sartre's expression. This brings us back full circle to the beginnings of the South African situation, which the current whites have only inherited, as it was their ancestors who, without the slightest legitimacy, settled in the country. Instead of integrating into the community, they have resorted to a system of apartheid which only makes them more vulnerable and on

occasion turns against them: just as they did not want anyone else, no-one else wants them. Such is the law of a system that is so strange and paradoxical that it could never last or be completely manageable in its repressiveness.

The variations in Gordimer's novels are all different perspectives from which to approach the effects of apartheid. *July's People* is a novel dedicated to the disastrous effects that apartheid has upon the whites themselves, a people whose place in South Africa is perhaps the most questionable and most difficult to pinpoint, so that, were they not to give in to irrational fears, they logically would be the first to refuse such a system.

Here, Gordimer is developing the paradoxes of a situation that is certainly characteristic of all colonial regimes, but which in South Africa has been systematised more thoroughly and for longer than elsewhere. She does not do this from a realistic, militant perspective which would entail recounting the facts in order to denounce them, but rather views them through a magnifying glass which reveals both the unique features of the situation and its universal qualities.

Gordimer's analysis of the white bourgeoisie, represented by the Smales family, brings to light a certain number of general observations on the so-called civilised white world. The Smales, like fish out of water, lose their identity when they no longer have their usual points of reference. In this regard, reference could be made to the analyses of novelists or contemporary philosophers like Georges Perec and Jean Baudrillard, but in a more dramatic context since here the characters feel that they are in mortal danger. In the hut that July's family has been kind enough to lend to the Smales, the white family's possessions are reduced to a few knick-knacks that were lying around in their car, probably because they were of little value. Added to these are two or three other trinkets which they had the presence of mind to take with them in their hasty departure. They have enough to live on, or at least to survive, but they also have the feeling of extreme destitution, and this is precisely the point. July's hut, which houses a few traditional craft objects, is no better equipped than their own. However, there is obviously a big difference between having very little and being deprived of everything that one

had and thought irremovable. In accordance with a well-known philosophical dialectic, the Smales experience the loss of their considerable assets as the loss of their being; and, in a sense, they are not wrong as it is effectively their way of life which is being called into question, but they are unable to distinguish this from their essential being.

Bam and Maureen are completely dependent upon their material environment and possessions to define their social standing and senses of self. The remarkable thing is that this is not the case with their children, who adapt almost immediately and quite effortlessly to their new way of life. It could be said that, for them, this is a positive experience from which they will benefit in the future. This means, then, that the character traits of the parents are purely culturally acquired and not hereditary in nature. Each supposedly civilised individual takes on the traits which go to make up the civilisation of the community in which he lives and from which he draws his way of life. It is impossible to see in this any proof of natural differentiation which might demarcate the civilised from the rest – an extremely important observation in a racial and racist society which claims that apartheid is based on natural differences between ethnic groups, in this case blacks and whites. Throughout the novel, Gordimer positions her pawns with implacable rigour; she excludes all commentary in such a way that the facts seem to 'speak for themselves' with considerable demonstrative force.

Those traits which are characteristic of Western civilisation are personal, non-hereditary and acquired; the process is also extremely fragile, even when it occurs from birth onwards. Victor, the oldest of the Smales' three children, is at least twelve or thirteen years old; and yet, like his siblings, he very quickly becomes a 'little savage', as his parents might have put it, had they been brave enough to speak openly. To acknowledge the fragility, or precariousness, of what was once their world – a part of which was their children's education – can only contribute to the parents' state of distress. Not only have they lost everything that once made up their world, but they must also acknowledge that for their children, their own flesh and blood, this world is already forgotten, without memories or nostalgia. The crisis that they are experiencing, the outcome

of which is unknown, is an identity crisis: who are they now that they are no longer who they used to be? It is also a moral crisis: who were they that their state of being could have so quickly dissolved into nothingness? This crisis is all the more serious in that it is retrospective and thus irresolvable.

The Smales senior are experiencing a total void as they are currently condemned not only to a material and social vacuum, but also to the annihilation of all that, in the past, they believed to be solid. So-called 'Western' or 'white' civilisation has no staying power beyond the objects on which it is founded; this is why these objects are fetishised – an attitude that is usually attributed to uncivilised peoples! Throughout the experiences that are recounted in the novel, this reversal occurs with at least two objects which are effectively the most important of the Smales' possessions. One, the 'bakkie', is a type of all-terrain pick-up in which they arrived at July's village; the other is the gun, formerly used by Bam for hunting. The role of these two objects in the relationship between the small black community of July's village and the Smales is the object of much of Gordimer's attention, and gives rise to lengthy plot developments.

These analyses alternate with the vicissitudes that make up the plot and the Smales' anguished reactions. They also reveal that the blacks consider the objects in question as utilitarian, because they are, or could be, the objects that they will, or might, need most. The whites, on the other hand, attach symbolic value to their possessions, viewing them as status symbols and the hallmark of their privilege and superiority. A utilitarian value for the blacks and a symbolic value for the whites: this is exactly the opposite of the stance taken by proponents of 'primitive mentality'[4] and their successors, the psycho-ethnologists. Once again, but without seeming to do so, Gordimer is positioning her pawns with devastating boldness. Sudden flashes of irony take the reader by surprise, without the author having to target the Smales themselves (who are quite decent folk). They are exemplary of how white civilisation can affect ordinary people; among these very serious effects is the propensity to over-reaction and violent dissension.

In actual fact, the novel is much harsher towards several generally held beliefs and convictions than it is towards the Smales, who are only modest figures in the parade of history. The lesson that emerges from *July's People* is that sometimes the King is 'in the all together', even if he is white. Once deprived of their finery, the whites are as naked as the most savage Negro living in the forest, but they are even worse off because they are unaccustomed to this. Believing themselves to be the masters of the objects to which they become enslaved, once they no longer have them, they are not just naked but stripped bare. They feel degraded and demeaned.

But what of the blacks and their perception of the whites in all this? In this respect, the main protagonist is July because he is by definition the intermediary between the two groups. This position of 'go-between', and its concomitant ambiguity, are evident in the novel's title. With 'July's people', it is understood (in the language of black servants like July) that the 'people' in question refer to the bosses or masters, that is, the whites. But the apostrophe indicating possession in 'July's', has become problematic. It used to signify the basic segregation of apartheid, clothing it in a conveniently vague word. What happens once this apostrophe no longer guarantees the usual mode of functioning? Perhaps the meaning of the expression changes completely: 'July's people' might now refer to July's own family, and the villagers with whom he once again lives. This is his real world and the whites have no say in it, only too happy to be forgotten. This ambiguity of meaning is characteristic of the uncertainty of the situation; nobody knows what the outcome will be.

July's People contains a number of very tense confrontations. These are knife-edge situations, and the constant fear is that something will suddenly turn, thus irreversibly and dramatically breaking the equilibrium. It is through these confrontations that the difficulties in black-white relations are crystallised. Nearly all these confrontations (the result of Maureen's aggressiveness) pit the white woman, Maureen, against July. However, July is not just on the defensive as he might well be, a good servant being unjustly accused after fifteen years of loyal service. He is sickened to see that Maureen does not trust him even though she has every reason to, given their long past history. The particular nature of their relationship

stems from the fact that it was Maureen who gave orders to July, even though the rest of the family also benefited from his services: it was she who spoke to him and was his boss.

As it is this relationship that has changed the most, the question that must be asked is 'What is Maureen in relation to July *now*'? July's relationship with Bam and the children remains more or less unchanged: he endeavours as far as possible (and with some success) to meet their needs and ensure their daily subsistence. Maureen, on the other hand, cannot avoid the issue of the tone of her conversations with July. This is an important matter because it is an expression of the overall redefinition of their relationship, and thus the very thing that Maureen finds problematic.

There is not the shadow of a doubt that the new tone that is used between the two of them is proof that July is no longer the servant, nor Maureen the 'Madam'. On a practical level, it means that July acts of his own accord and takes the initiative without waiting for orders to be given. Maureen does not actually give him any orders because she is intelligent enough to know that to do so would be incongruous. It is also difficult to see how she could do so without knowing what is or is not possible in this new, uncharted territory. This does not stop her from feeling that July is constantly 'pulling the rug from under her feet'.

In the course of their recurrent confrontations, Maureen's extreme aggression stands out, whilst July is clearly doing the best that he can under difficult circumstances. Moreover, it is noticeable that all of the so-called faux pas which occur are committed by Maureen and not July. This is certainly proof that she has lost her self-control whilst he is in full possession of all his faculties; in fact, it is just another way of asking why Maureen loses all self-control exactly when, by force of circumstance, she loses control over July? This simultaneous double loss reveals a general destabilisation against which Maureen has no recourse, save bad faith. She is reduced to acting in bad faith when she accuses July, whilst he, on the other hand, feels perfectly justified in his actions. If he has taken complete control of the situation, and is doing much more than he did previously, it is because he knows that only he has the necessary knowledge and is in a position to act.

In fact, it would be senseless to ask Maureen's advice in a world that she does not know and when circumstances have overtaken her. Maureen's control was based on knowledge and power which she no longer has; July's attitude is mere acknowledgement of this fact, but an acknowledgement which is, of course, essential. It is so right, so obvious, that even Maureen cannot help but acknowledge it too, and her anger is directed against this. July is not only a calm witness but also the incarnation of it because his very presence and way of being convey this, without having to put it into words. In July, Maureen sees her old habits and behaviour crumble away.

To Maureen, everything that July does now (albeit necessary and perfectly justified) is a threat. Although not a threat to who she *is*, because she no longer is 'anything', it is a threat to what she *was*, which was 'everything'. She never stops quibbling in order to challenge the unchallengeable. In fact, it is possible to speak of denial here because Maureen cannot bring herself to admit that she is hurt that July is no longer the submissive servant. The only thing July no longer exhibits is that deference he once showed to his former 'Madam'. This modest outward sign demonstrates, of course, an enormous transformation: this tiny difference in tone is highly indicative. July is no longer a submissive servant; he is a man trying to help out people in difficulty for whom he is the only hope.

Although it is hard to say how conscious or unconscious July's attitude is, it is evident that he is doing all he can not to exploit the situation. Or, on a more subtle level, he is doing all he can not to give the impression that he is exploiting the situation. However, the situation being what it is, July has no time to lose and he does not think to hide the truth: circumstances have freed him. The submissive role is no longer appropriate, and from now on he must act autonomously; whether or not this affords him pleasure is not the issue.

In all likelihood, Maureen would probably feel some dark pleasure in showing July that he is exploiting the situation, but once again she cannot do so, and her rage, which is directed as much towards herself as July, comes from this frustration. Practically speaking, deference on July's part

would change nothing at all, but it would appease her pride. This is something which she desperately needs at a time when everything is conspiring to humiliate her, everything, that is, including her unfair suspicion that she is harbouring racist feelings. Yet here too Gordimer sees to it that Maureen is challenged.

Maureen is going through a serious crisis, but on this occasion she is not consumed by racism. Her strongest relationship with black people goes back to her childhood, when she experienced an intensely symbiotic relationship with her nanny Lydia, the likes of which she has not experienced since. In Maureen's subconscious, she expects going back to the black world to be a return to that same fusion. However, this proves impossible for a number of reasons. Firstly, such a relationship is exclusively the preserve of childhood (like Gina, the Smales' daughter, whose best friend is Nyiko, the little black girl from the village). Secondly, it is impossible because, for July, the new situation is not a matter of revenge, but of emancipation. It is emancipation in the true, original meaning of the word, in that July acquires his own independent personality. Discovering and exploring this is exactly the opposite of the kind of relationship which might have appeased Maureen. The tragedy of collective, as of individual, history is the time-lag whereby people are not ready to experience the same thing at the same time.

Maureen's unspoken wish may well be that July should display emotion and compassion towards her. However, with everything that is happening to him personally, July is too busy for such an emotional double act. Thus Maureen, disappointed and frustrated, defends herself against these feelings through aggression. She cannot get the tenderness and consolation that she needs from her children, who are too excited by the adventure, or from Bam, who is himself too weak and defeated. So, in spite of herself, she expects something from July, who is obviously the strong man in the situation. Although July provides the Smales with everything that he can materially, and is, in all other respects, beyond reproach, this 'something' never comes.

The emotional and mental attitude that Gordimer is analysing here goes beyond individual psychology; it rests upon a collection of obser-

vations and premonitions concerning a section of white society in South Africa, notably those who, like the Smales', are liberals without actually being activists. As far back as 1981, the novelist knows that these nice, respectable people are at risk of being disappointed by the Revolution when it finally happens. Consciously or not, they hope that their attitude will earn them some form of recognition from the blacks, and that once the whites have been deposed of their political power, the blacks will show some kindness towards them by way of compensation. This is a dangerous illusion, and Gordimer is too insightful to believe that things can turn out this way. Even if one were to take the most favourable situation possible for the whites, by imagining them dealing with blacks who would have no desire for revenge or hatred, it is all too obvious that the blacks would have other things to do besides consoling the dispossessed whites. This is another example of lucid irony, so typical of Gordimer's writing.

There is a risk that the malaise and general discomfort felt by Maureen will affect a good number of whites when the apartheid regime ends – even those whites who are not actually in power. They will lose the deferential treatment that has benefited them and will have to tolerate feeling dependent on the blacks who will now be in charge of the situation. Will this malaise be only temporary for those who remain out of necessity or choice? This is perhaps what is suggested at the end of the novel when an aeroplane flies over the village, signifying the end of the experience.

The crisis is thus temporary and limited. Yet as far as July is concerned, surely there can be no return to the status quo. He has already come so far down the path of emancipation that turning back is unthinkable – even if the time is not yet right to wonder what will happen from now on. In the short term, this story has meaning: it implies that the blacks will make significant advances, whereas there will be great uncertainty for the whites. The danger is that they will lose their identity as well as their points of reference. This is what happens to Maureen when she arrives in the village: 'She was not in possession of any part of her life. One or another could only be turned up, by hazard. The background had

fallen away; since that first morning she had become conscious in the hut, she had regained no established point of a continuing present from which to recognise her own sequence' (1981, 170).

The importance placed upon time underlines several characteristic features of the whites' way of life. They need to organise their lives according to programmes and plans, as is the case with Duncan, the young murderer in *The House Gun*. This is a weakness because it means that they have great difficulty in accepting the unexpected, that element which characterises events and, broadly speaking, what we call History (and in South Africa, History has been happening on a greater scale than elsewhere). Time is also a dimension that whites use for justificatory purposes: this is a society which has all the more need to organise its past along chronological lines because its origins are clearly problematic. When the relationship with time is no longer embodied in a collection of signs inscribed upon daily life, a whole group of people becomes disturbed and vulnerable, and is subjectively annihilated. This observation is harsh, but not hopeless. The exploits recounted in *July's People* are a warning. Its brutality is a rite of passage and is essential in the move towards a new society.

Man and Woman as a Couple

> *'I shall never write an autobiography – I'm much too jealous of my privacy, for that – but I begin to think that my experience as a product of this social phenomenon has relevance beyond the personal ; it may be a modest part of alternative history if pieced together with the experience of other writers.'*[5]

In Gordimer's writing the portrayal of the couple, and the (white) woman in particular, is no less important than her depiction of apartheid. These descriptions could be interpreted as the public and the private aspect of the novelist's own presence in the world. However, whereas in speeches and articles, Gordimer often expresses her own opinion on the public domain, she refrains from personal comment on private matters. Indeed,

were this not so, she would find it difficult to avoid autobiographical writing. Before tackling issues connected with the couple, love and sexuality, it is thus appropriate to recall that the novelist herself stresses her desire to keep her own life private. Gordimer's analysis may well be rooted in personal experience; nevertheless, our focus will rather be on what the novelist uses to sustain her fictional writing, from a perspective that is both specific and of universal application.

The coexistence of men and women is as problematic as it is necessary, since it is paradoxical to want to fuse together such profoundly different beings. And yet, without exception, this union is rooted in the deepest of human desires. It generally takes the form of a couple; this is the most common way of life there is, but one which is also highly risky. One might speak of both its extreme fragility and incredible solidity. This double aspect is one that Gordimer constantly explores through the genre of the novel, which has the advantage of describing human life in its duration. It is in this regard that the paradoxes of the couple are played out, as the couple, like a mutant force, breaks up constantly only to form again. An inevitable and essential contradiction follows from this – the human desire for permanence and transcendence pitted against time.

The couple wants to reconcile the irreconcilable. If this were mere theory, one might find the scheme somewhat extravagant, but it concerns real life, where problems that we think have been chased out the door come back in through the window, more dangerous than ever before. These contradictions are particularly apparent as the (sub)conscious questioning of the novelist's trapped characters is exposed through her use of irony and sense of tragedy.

The Conservationist

Gordimer's irony is most obvious when it catches out the very person who has tried so hard to avoid it. In *The Conservationist*, Mehring's life can be seen from this perspective: he is a man who, in every respect, places too much confidence in a way of life based on separation (or 'apartheid' to use the political term).

When the novel bearing his name opens, the Conservationist has long since discontinued living as part of a couple. He has not remarried nor had a steady relationship with anyone since divorcing a woman who left for the United States. In essence, his relations with the opposite sex are limited to occasional sleeping around after parties, occurrences which do not imply any sort of commitment or effort on his behalf, because, as a wealthy bachelor, he is very much in demand with the hosts of society dinner parties. Against this backdrop, which has become his habitual way of life, there are two incidents which stand out: one is durable, the other a once-off. Both, however, enable us to describe his relationship with women as the separate functioning of two opposing needs which even the most ordinary of couples seek to reconcile. The first need is for exchange and dialogue, which can only be satisfied in a long-term relationship. The second is the need for unquestionable, total fusion of the type shared during sex, at least for the brief moment that it lasts.

There is dialogue (albeit overdeveloped) in Mehring's life, but it is with a woman who very quickly becomes absent and is destined to remain so. There is also an example of perfect sexual fusion, but it is an exception, a once-off. What is not present is even a hint of the idea that the two can coexist simultaneously: it is as if Mehring has decided once and for all that these two aspects of his relationship with women are destined to remain separate.

Mehring spends most of his time carrying on a fictional dialogue with a woman who is no longer part of his life, and who was not even around much during the time when these conversations, which he has not stopped recalling, actually took place. The intense presence of the woman in the imaginary dialogue is all the more notable as the two never shared the kind of amorous passion that leaves an indelible imprint on certain people. On the contrary, their dialogue is likely to go on indefinitely for the opposite reason, that is, because it is highly conflictual and impossible to resolve. Moreover, it is not, strictly speaking, a dialogue because it is almost entirely the woman who speaks, calling into question Mehring's behaviour and denouncing his typically masculine, chauvinist behaviour. This behaviour is an intrinsic part of his role as 'Conservationist', and

gives the novel its title. As a wealthy white man, Mehring has certain advantages which he uses without reservation when he so wishes, and which he sees no reason to renounce. Given this attitude, it is highly probable that the real dialogue was no more than a brief moment in his life; indeed, even at the time, it was probably a monologue without any real exchange. Now, it has become a worn-out, incoherent leitmotiv with which he is obsessed.

In contrast to this type of relationship, the novel also describes a brief encounter which is rather disturbing because the temporary completeness that sex provides is revealed in its pure state. This fascinating, commonplace episode lasts for one night, in an aeroplane that is bringing Mehring back home. He is seated next to a young Portuguese girl whose family is only a few rows away. Taking advantage of their extreme closeness and despite the danger of being caught, with the tacit consent of the young girl, he indulges in sexual fondling which affords him immense pleasure. This carries on until the morning, when the people on board begin to stir; it is obviously the end of an affair that will have no sequel It is also an example of an encounter outside of space and time, thus conferring an absolute value on eroticism.

Gordimer stresses that Mehring's behaviour conforms here to his chauvinist tendencies because, even though the young girl allows him to fondle her, it is also true that he takes advantage of the situation. Moreover, there is the suggestion that she may well have allowed it to happen because she is a Mediterranean woman who is atavistically used to being submissive. And yet here, as elsewhere, the novelist expresses an ambiguous attitude towards sex. She describes in intimate detail the silent, discreet gestures of Mehring's extended moment of intimate joy, making it clear that this is a version of perfect happiness, a state of grace because of its total gratuitousness. It is totally unstructured, does not guarantee any functioning and is cut off from all reference and effect. It does not come under any critique, a word which perfectly defines the woman in the dialogue. The only point of similarity between these two female relationships is that they are both reduced to a state of memory. There is no place for a woman in Mehring's present life because

such a place could only exist within a couple. We must, therefore, turn our attention again to the couple, that formula as improbable as it is inevitable.

A Guest of Honour

A Guest of Honour is the story of two couples; one follows on from the other, for no other reason than that one couple is past, and the other present. Space and time also play a role: James Bray has left his wife Olivia in England to come to an African country, where he meets Rebecca, the woman with whom he forms a new couple.

Bray has already lived in this same African country for a number of years with his wife Olivia, and their daughter Venetia was also born there. As the novel opens, Venetia is about to become a mother herself. This clearly signifies the succession of generations and reminds us that a man can be assured of at least two generations, whereas a woman's faculty for procreation is limited to a single generation. The years that the Brays spent in Africa as a harmonious and united couple were passionate ones; they lived life to the full. Nor did this change after their return to a peaceful English village. The issue now is whether past experience can be repeated. The couple's opinions on this differ: for Olivia, the Brays' whole African experience has already acquired the status of ancient history, and she has no real desire to relive it. This is not the case for James, who is tempted by the invitation to attend the Independence celebrations of the new African State where his old friend, Adamson Mweta, is now President. As Olivia is detained in England with Venetia, who is about to have a baby, James goes alone. There is no ulterior motive behind the decision that Olivia will join her husband as soon as possible.

As the pages are turned, or rather, as the weeks and months go by, it becomes clear that this arrangement is a mere formality. Of course, neither of the two admits this openly, but the moment comes when it is clear that Olivia will not join her husband. They maintain a connection through fairly regular, but not entirely innocuous, correspondence: Olivia writes about her state of mind and James about events in Africa and the continent's evolving politics.

James soon has to lie by omission to hide his affair with a young white woman, Rebecca. She adoringly gives him her body, but soon it becomes something more, as an attachment that could, in the end, be called love develops between them. It is pointless to say that their future together is uncertain in the extreme – in fact, they do not even have one as Bray is murdered before he leaves the country. However, they live intensely in the present, sharing truly precious complicity. Rebecca is younger than James by about twenty-five years. This must surely reinforce his feeling that their affair will be short-lived and outside of time. Whereas his life with Olivia occurred over time, his life with Rebecca disregards the temporal dimension, and furthermore, can in no way be prolonged. When Rebecca finds herself alone after Bray's death, she cannot stop thinking that she will never have the child that she dreamed of having with him. Their story is over, whereas the couple he formed with Olivia somehow seems limitless. Whatever the case, it is clear that the couple can never be the victor in the battle against time: the couple will either be worn away, or it will fail to transform itself into something durable. Almost subconsciously, men and women are tempted to try out these two different approaches, and it is usually the man who, tired of the long-term couple, attempts a love affair outside of time.

In *A Guest of Honour*, this attempt (or temptation) could be viewed as one of many excesses which, for the white man, traditionally take place in Africa. James Bray leaves the couple and family life so that he can become deeply involved in compelling political action (and soon conflict) in an African country where he rejoins his old friends Mweta and Shinza. It is widely known that, as convincing and sincere as this type of political commitment may be, to a certain extent it also involves the temptation of sexual liberation and a change of lifestyle. The May 1968 revolution in France revealed a demand for the intertwining of these two elements. More than one older couple, like James and Olivia, caved in under the pressure of this movement and the reversal rooted in politico-Freudian considerations. Bray is certainly not an adventurer, but in 1970 Gordimer could already perceive in the excitement of African independence, the incredibly invigorating breath of fresh air that blew in the desire for

renewal in certain lives. At the end of *A Guest of Honour*, there are traces of a tendency towards a discreet, sentimental lyricism, rarely found in Gordimer's work. This is the moment when James and Rebecca are trying to flee by car to take an aeroplane to Europe. The combination of their journey across a landscape that is both splendid and desolate, the awareness of their love and probable separation, their anxious uncertainty about escaping, and their happiness at being creates a scene comparable to any in Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. However, whereas the Russian author explores all the lyrical possibilities of a great novelistic moment in a musical, almost symphonic way, Gordimer's muted melody is heart-wrenching but discreet; it is not the stuff of popular novels. In her best moments, only a secret, somewhat thwarted music can be heard close to the couple. Love affair or not, the couple is a question, and no magnificent, death-defying affirmation.

Even in the most clear-cut cases, the issue of the couple is raised. It is undeniable that James and Olivia have been a married couple for twenty-two years. However, with the distance that comes with his trip to Africa, it dawns on Bray that, as a couple, they were always the 'combination of two intact personalities rather than the anonymous, double-headed organism, husband-and-wife' (1971, 41). This consideration may be helpful in understanding how James and Olivia break up without acrimony once they are geographically separated.

What is a couple, and what, in essence, is its foundation? This question is not easily answered. The issue of sex is far more clear-cut, not that any conclusions can be drawn from this. James' and Rebecca's sexual relationship is powerful and fulfilling. It is never openly stated that their attachment boils down to this, but the success of their sex life is emphasised. Here, we find another of Gordimer's penetrating insights: the wholly masculine desire that is satisfied by the sexual act is, like all desires, undifferentiated: 'the awful undifferentiated desire that he hadn't felt since he was an overgrown youth' (1971, 142). Physical desire could thus be characterised as person-unspecific, nameless and non-individual, which is why it is difficult to base relationships which have institutional and social ramifications on it.

One point which is emphasised in the novel is that Rebecca is white, contrary to what one might have expected. Bray himself remarks upon this, asking what Olivia would think of his affair with Rebecca (not that she will ever know about it). He realises that if Rebecca were black, the situation would seem more natural and understandable to Olivia and others. It would be part of the well-known story of the white European male who finds in the African female (labelled the 'negress' in eighteenth-century exotic literature) all the femininity that European women have lost in the course of becoming liberated. Gordimer does not bother to deal with this type of African story. When she does evoke the relationship between a white man and black woman in two of her short stories 'Town and Country Lovers, One & Two' (*A Soldier's Embrace*), it is to denounce the horrific brutality of apartheid. Meanwhile, the relationship between a black man and white woman is the subject of another novel, *My Son's Story*.

No such visible difference attracts Bray to Rebecca; it is simply that their relationship needs none of the explanation that goes to make up the long, shared history of older couples. Not only does James' new affair seem incomprehensible, but he himself has absolutely no desire to understand it. It is enough that the relationship is what it is; this is why it is so seductive and refreshing: 'All his life he had lived by reason; now unreason came and paradoxically he was resolved . . .' (1971, 298).

Such contradictions are probably characteristic of all Westernised couples. On one hand, the marital couple is a reasonable and durable way of organising one's life; on the other, there is the meeting between a man and a woman which revives the myth of a love beyond both reason and time. Gordimer is certainly not convinced that the first system is the better: it may well endure but can often become worn and meaningless. The second has disadvantages too: love that escapes time and reason is romantic and post-romantic passion. Gordimer reveals both the seductiveness of this as well as its deadly, even self-destructive, aspect. From the way that Bray talks about his relationship with Rebecca, it might be defined as 'love' – a kind of irrevocable decision not up for question or debate. However, by becoming involved with Rebecca, Bray also accepts

his own death because there can, in fact, be no conceivable future for him with her. By positioning himself outside of the conceivable in this way, he is also placing himself in nothingness and in the path of death, in whatever form it may take.

Gordimer's emphasis on the difference between this relationship with Rebecca, and what might have been if Bray were having an affair with an African woman, encourages the reader to think that the meaning and duration of the relationship would have been different. For Bray, it could have meant choosing a way of life comparable to that of his African friend Shinza, a man of about his own age, who has recently set up home again with a very young wife and their newborn child.

Simply put, from the European perspective (of the couple), James is just too old to start over. Europeans, including the men, have great difficulty in outliving the weight of their past. In their wish to escape, they give in to the dream of a fresh start, but are ultimately betrayed by time.

Selected Short Stories

A Find, Sins of the Third Age, You Name It

Gordimer extends her comparison of married couples and love affairs to several of her short stories. These stories are more commonplace in that they are not so intricately connected to specific historical events. The married couple is placed in both the realm of dishonest compromise and of duration, the former guaranteeing the latter. This is sometimes expressed in a pleasantly ironic, disenchanted way, as is the case in 'A Find' *(Jump and Other Stories)*, in which a man lives out an Oriental tale in order to have his pick of women. He eventually decides on one of them even though he knows full well that she has lied to him. However, he finds her attractive and so he marries her. The conclusion to the story is as follows: 'They live together with no more unsaid, between them, than any other couple' (1991, 54).

At other times Gordimer's observations are much harsher. Her tone, however, is never lofty but remains down to earth and practical. In

'Sins of the Third Age' (*Something Out There*), an elderly South African couple buy a little house in Italy in order to retire there. One day, the man, Peter, who has retired to Italy before his wife Mania, announces that there is another woman in his life. After all the histrionics, Mania eventually asks to join Peter in Italy, and accepts that he should continue to see the other woman. Not that he does; in fact he does nothing other than wait to die. He ends his affair without saying why, and the couple survives, for the very good reason that the relationship has already endured for over fifty years.

'You Name It' (*A Soldier's Embrace*) is another short story which juxtaposes the longevity of the married couple with the brevity of love affairs. In her youth, a young married woman has an affair, which results in the birth of her daughter, fathered by her lover who disappears shortly thereafter. They correspond for a long time, and she even leaves her husband, but eventually goes back to him and resumes their family life as she forgets about the past affair. One day, by chance, she sees the name of her former lover scribbled on the wall of a telephone booth, and it is then that she realises that the whole affair belongs to the past, that her daughter has really become her husband's child, and that she cannot breathe life into something that was merely a 'youthful fling'.

It is because of this dual temporality that brief affairs can exist in the long term. Simply put, their temporary nature does not deprive them of meaning. These affairs are testimony to irreconcilable desires and the discreet tragedy of the human condition. Gordimer encourages us to think that such situations should not be viewed in terms of success or failure. In a broad sense, the couple in all its variations is truly a human creation, full of errors and illusions, but undeniably a form of existence.

My Son's Story

In 1990, twenty years after *A Guest of Honour* (1970), the passage from an older couple to a new love affair resurfaces. This time, Gordimer supplies us with a different type of explanation, one which is much fuller and more detailed. Sonny, a black activist is unfaithful to his wife Aila with Hannah, a white activist; they are united both because of their shared

struggle and their different skin colours. Prior to this the novelist has not tackled the subject of interracial love so closely, even though in apartheid South Africa, this would certainly have been expected. Such an expectation is surely not what motivates Gordimer; on the contrary, this fairly short, interracial love story is not treated as a case of forbidden passion condemned by society, which is probably why Gordimer only tackles the issue at a time when the hold of race laws is weakening. There is also another reason why the story is not what one might have expected: it does not entirely revolve around the differences between the two couples and kinds of love, where the older couple is based on the similarities between the black man and his black wife, but the new couple on the differences between the black man and white lover. In fact, in moving from one to the other, a third dimension opens up: the little-known (now emancipated) black woman about whom there is much to learn.

The break-up of the older couple in the novel is painful, probably because the geographical proximity between his wife and mistress forces the man to lie about his new affair. As for the new couple, after a few months this breaks up by itself without the intervention of death or any external factor. This is symbolic of the specific difficulty of transforming a passionate affair into a real long-term relationship. The novel, however, remains positive towards the future because of a third dimension and a probable consequence of the year in which it was written – 1990, a time of hope for South Africa.

What is most striking about Aila and Sonny, the older couple, is their solidarity. Gordimer probably chose to emphasise this so as to make the couple's fate more ironic and their break-up even more poignant. However, and paradoxically, everything that unites a couple can also be used against it. Aila and Sonny's union is based on love, mutual desire and on a well-established family structure. This might lead to the premature judgement that the more a couple works at making their relationship solid, the less recourse they have against destructive, external peccadilloes. The peccadillo, however, only appears as such because it brings out all the flaws in the once united couple, which are actually the reverse side of its strengths.

Aila and Sonny were married at a very young age: Aila was not yet eighteen and Sonny not much older. Such a marriage challenges the couple's main characteristic, that is, the ability to face the long term. From the outset, they have an advantage: 'there was passion and affection' (1990, 8) between them, as well as complete trust because of their mutual commitment and sense of responsibility.

In truth, Sonny is the one who assumes most responsibility. Gordimer leads us to question how Aila shares this with her husband: can her attitude be defined as submissive? Yet the novelist asks us to go deeper by using the intermediary of their son, Will, to reflect upon the happy times: 'For what she wanted was, in essence, always what he wanted; and that is not as simple or purely submissive as it sounds. I didn't – don't – pretend to understand how' (1990, 21). In short, this way of life is characterised by a total lack of difference between the two, which in itself is cause for reflection. Even if harmony is achieved through entirely instinctive and spontaneous behaviour, some differences have inevitably been smoothed over in order to achieve such perfection. This euphoric state is actually dangerous, as the married couple needs to rely on its recognised and accepted differences in order to survive; in their absence, the couple will eventually wither away.

The absence of difference also explains why there is no complicity in a couple like this – indeed, none is needed. Shared projects are clearly and rationally discussed. Having a family is a shared decision: Sonny and Aila would have children, 'but not more than two' (1990, 8). Both are self-controlled, Sonny because he is the decision-maker and Aila because she is described '. . . in the watchful quiet of her readiness' (1990, 10). Gordimer's description of Aila is convincing enough to sound warning bells, particularly as the Gods usually feel provoked by prettily planned human lives in which they are not involved: 'One of the early sweet intimacies between them was that they both had rejected any religious beliefs' (1990, 8–9).

Destiny has many forms. In Gordimer's novels, destiny often takes the form of political events, which are particularly disruptive in the novelist's own country. Throughout the first part of Sonny and Aila's story, these

events seem to conspire against the couple in favour of the new relationship which Sonny establishes with Hannah.

The solidity of the first couple becomes destabilised by external events. Sonny, who believes he has clearly defined his position as a coloured schoolteacher in a disadvantaged area, finds himself drifting into underground activism. The illusion that it is enough to behave oneself and protect one's children is inevitably shattered in the explosive climate created by apartheid violence. Sonny, an honest man, fights for the black cause, and finds himself in prison – the first decisive experience of his life which Aila does not share. On the contrary, during this first prison term it is Hannah who appears like a blonde angel come to help him. She is a young white woman sent by an international human rights organisation to help prisoners and their families. Sonny falls in love with her; it is passionate love, which takes the form of irrepressible desire.

Thus begins what could be a classic tale of adultery, were it not for the unique South African situation which considerably amplifies the commonplace. The starting point is the same: man's desire for a fresh start. Sonny becomes aware that he and Aila are now an older couple, united by the routine of their marriage. As a couple, their behaviour, based on mutual understanding, is too predictable. The new couple, on the other hand, benefits both from the unexpected novelty of the situation as well as from the re-stimulation of physical desire outside of marriage. Moreover, external circumstances favour this new couple in at least two areas: political and racial.

Sonny and Hannah's shared activism creates a complicity between the two that is associated with their love, because it too is clandestine: 'For months the most precious aspect of his new life with Hannah was that it was clandestine. Like underground political life, it had nothing to do with the everyday. They owned one another because their times together were shared with no-one' (1990, 69–70). Sonny and Hannah are linked, then, by a dual complicity as their passionate affair and political activities blur into one: 'Hannah '. . . was enfolded, one with it, she had connected his manhood, his sexual power as a man, with it! She had given commitment the pumping of the heart' (1990, 263). Once again, when

evoking the couple's pleasure and excitement, Gordimer brushes with lyricism without actually engaging in it. While Sonny experiences absolute happiness thanks to his blonde angel, the family that knows it has been abandoned struggles in the shadows of an impasse. Moreover, and in spite of apartheid, Sonny and Hannah cannot be seen as a persecuted or damned couple. Their guilty relationship does not prevent their encounters from being extremely peaceful. When they have to be apart for a while, it is merely because Hannah goes to her grandmother's funeral. Whilst it is true that visa problems prolong her absence and that Sonny does not cope too well with this, many other things are making him uneasy at the same time, including the feeling that their affair is coming to an end. They are not star-crossed lovers who must defy the prohibitions of apartheid; they are merely a clandestine couple who must be cautious and discreet.

The other circumstance which gives rise to, and amplifies, their desire is their difference in skin colour. Hannah is the typical white woman with flaxen blonde hair and blue eyes, a common trap for the black man, as Sonny's son, Will, remarks as sarcastically and offensively as possible to ward off his pain. The physical portrait of Hannah is sometimes drawn directly by the novelist, and at other times by Will. In the first instance, the emphasis is on her ordinariness, whilst in the second it is her unattractiveness that is stressed, in a furious, defamatory tone. Hannah has the pink flesh, as well as the small round eyes and pale hair, of a pig. Sonny is really stupid to have fallen for this low-grade fantasy and to have given in to the infamous attraction which the white woman holds for the black man.

In this novel, Will's criticism is considerably more developed than Hannah's attractive side. Indeed, when reading Gordimer, a frequent impression is that the novelist is very well-acquainted with Frantz Fanon, whose analyses in *Black Skin, White Masks*[6] are the authority on the subject. Gordimer's reappraisal of these analyses consists in making Will a particularly impressionable, biased disciple of Fanon's so that the author does not have to express her own opinion, the point being to describe rather than judge. In *My Son's Story* Gordimer's particularly subtle novelistic

technique means that she can make the two versions of the love story coexist simultaneously: the passionate version experienced by Sonny whose attraction to Hannah is an irrepressible desire, and the pitiful version recounted by Will, whose experience of love for his father is cruelly disappointing. It cannot be denied that apartheid plays a part in this affair in that here is a love founded on difference, and in the context of apartheid the fascination–repulsion aspect of racial differences becomes the essential element of relationships with others, and even of life itself. Proof is that, after a few years, the barriers of apartheid are lifted just when Hannah and Sonny's relationship comes to an end. External circumstances are merely a pretext to end the affair because what is really at stake is the link between this type of relationship and time.

As in *A Guest of Honour*, in *My Son's Story* there is also a difference in temporality between the two couples. The first couple establishes itself over time, that is, the twenty or so years needed for children to grow into adults and which is meant to last until death. The second couple claims to be in a sort of timeless love, which the lyricism of love terms eternity, and which excludes, or finds substitutes for, procreation. The novel demonstrates that both kinds of couple exist and that both are equally threatened by the temporality within which they are defined.

Like all reasonable couples, Sonny and Aila are ready to admit that it is normal for their relationship to change as their children grow up. This transformation is in line with procreating couples who bring children into this world: 'When a daughter begins to show breasts and a son's voice begins to be mistaken, on the phone, for his father's there comes a kind of reversal of the clandestinity courting couples have to practise in the house of their parents: the long-married now feel an inhibition about making love in the presence – separated only by the bedroom walls – of children who themselves are now capable of feeling the same sexual desires. Of course, this never would be said openly, between Aila and him; but it must have been there . . .' (1990, 68–69). Whatever their tacit agreement on the subject, it is not so easy to admit to being part of the generation that must give way to the next. All the more so as the full meaning of the word 'generation' becomes clear with the appearance of a third

generation, that of the child born to Baby, Sonny's and Aila's daughter. Whilst Aila steps joyously into her role of grandmother, happily accepting the continuity that this affords, Sonny feels that the birth impacts cruelly upon his relationship with Hannah, which is supposed to be outside of time. Sonny does not tell Hannah about the child, and once again it is Will who makes highly sarcastic comments on the grandfather, 'the great lover' (1990, 176), who has a paunch and whose chest is now covered in grey hairs. Sonny is probably at that stage when he does not want to look at himself, but every look in the mirror should dampen the ardour of this passionate love which he refuses to renounce.

To accept the long term is also to accept the ageing process; it is to accept that one is young only as long as one can procreate. The impulse for the second couple, the kind that Sonny forms with Hannah, is subconscious rebelliousness. Despite happiness at escaping the routine of marriage and time, the second couple also evolves and does not remain impervious for long to the desire for the relationship to last (even though this is contrary to its very essence). Sonny and Hannah experience a growing need to be together on a day to day basis: 'But months went by. Their concealment of each other from the world continued to be successful. And now they passed into the second stage of the syndrome that Sonny, never having had the experience before, did not recognise. The fascination in living something totally removed from domestic love with its social dimensions of ordinary shared pleasures among other people gave way to dissatisfaction that they could not do these ordinary things together. For these belonged to Aila, Aila and the children' (1990, 72).

Thus, the desire for enduring love develops between the two, but it is a fantasy with no real future. One should rather speak of brief flashes of desire, which may well be proof of a subconscious awareness of fragility. Even though Sonny and Hannah prefer not to think about it, they know that their affair is doomed to be ephemeral. This is why they both want to believe in the magic of certain everlasting memories: '[Hannah's] hand was squeezed bloodless where it had been in [Sonny's] clutch. She was sure, as lovers imagine at such times, that she would relive the sensation of that grasp to the end of her life' (1990, 118)

With the second couple, Sonny has not really missed out on having children, because he feels that, with Hannah, he is fathering something different: the revolution. Here, Gordimer's analysis is extremely insightful as she gives an account of the rejuvenation of a middle-aged man who allies a passionate, extramarital affair with revolutionary political activities. The novelist's analysis also enables us to understand the attraction of this double commitment, the dynamism that can be derived from it and the self-justificatory effect it produces. These explanations are of a scientific, biological nature, which explain the urge and its meaning, over and above interpersonal affinity: 'His attraction to Hannah belonged to the distorted place and time in which they – all of them – he, Aila, Hannah, lived. With Hannah there was the sexuality of commitment; for commitment implies danger, and the blind primal instinct is to ensure the species survives in circumstances of danger, even when the individual animal dies or the plant has had its season. In this freak displacement, biological drive of his life, which belonged with his wife and the children he'd begotten, was diverted to his lover. He and Hannah begot no child; the revolutionary movement was to be their survivor. The excitement of their mating was for that'(1990, 241–42).

Undoubtedly, this analysis explains how the happy moments cause the extramarital affair to flourish. However, these thoughts are also (at least partially) Sonny's own attempts at a justificatory discourse which would broaden the debate and so remove all traces of egoism from his extramarital affair. The above passage ends with a sentence that again dampens any hint of lyricism: 'But Aila was the revolutionary, now.' (1990, 242).

Before analysing the third direction in which the novelist moves the story, it is important to note that the opposition between the two types of couple is a mental construct, a relic of a European tradition that is about two centuries old. This tradition, which has adultery as its main theme, has been embellished and handed down through the genre of the novel. However, it so happens that Sonny is an avid and docile reader who prides himself on having absorbed the heritage of this culture, which is why he inevitably lives according to its tenets. According to this

conception of fundamental human relationships, which are only ever intersubjective, man feels himself torn between two sets of different yearnings, needs and desires, personified by two different women. And yet, man's personal dream is to reconcile the two so as to experience both at once. Tragically though, this is not possible. Traces of this dream can be found in Sonny, even though he is one of the least perverse beings in the world. Gordimer explains that, when he seeks to reunite wife and mistress in the same space, so as to view them in the same way, it is not 'part of the commonplace strategy of adultery' (1990, 92) whereby such an encounter is meant to prove that there is nothing to hide. Rather, it is much closer to the Platonic myth or desire to unite two irreconcilable ways of life within the same couple. Sonny's dream is commonplace yet moving. Moreover, dreaming becomes his habitual way of life as reality gradually eludes him. In the end, his entire love story with Hannah is perceived in dreamlike terms, even though they have been apart only a short while: 'When everything was forgotten, he dreamt of her: Hannah. A brief, brilliant dream precise as an engraving' (1990, 265). Furthermore, despite his desire for the reality of the first couple, Aila has gone overseas with no promise to return. Neither couple remains, and both women have taken to living apart from him.

In a movement that can be likened to that in *Burger's Daughter*, *My Son's Story* unfolds in three phases, rather than two. The first two are devoted to Sonny's two couples, whilst the third is a return to the first couple, albeit in a completely different form since Sonny reverts to it on his own without Aila. Although from a narrative perspective Sonny's voice is heard, this third phase is dedicated to the woman, and more specifically to Aila. This marvellous black woman, scarcely present until now, is the striking personality to emerge from the novel. Both kinds of couple, legitimate and clandestine, have had their day, the former revealing the dangers of over-similarity and the latter those of difference. Neither has succeeded in mastering the relationship over time. Yet something, or rather someone, does actually rise up from the ravaged space of political and emotional turmoil. This someone is a different Aila, whom nobody could have foreseen. She now has short hair in place of the older woman's

long plait, wears flat shoes, and organises a passport to travel overseas. Moreover, as we eventually discover, more than any of the other characters, she has been involved in underground political activities which lead to her own trial and imprisonment.

The birth certificate for this 'new' Aila is signed on the day that we discover that, by organising her daughter's marriage, '. . . for once she's taken on responsibility for something all by herself . . .' (1990, 169). Her birth certificate is also signed, *a fortiori*, on the day when, in a stunning reversal, father and son discover that she is actually the revolutionary of the family, whilst Sonny's political activities are on the decline as he is (somewhat unfairly) being sidelined.

In the newly emerging South Africa which is soon to be liberated, there will surely be a return to the concept of the couple, even if it means repeating the same mistakes of the past. It is not certain whether men, even young men, are likely to prove themselves very inventive in this regard: the example of Will would seem to suggest that, if there is indeed progress in emotional and sexual relationships, it will not come from young men like him. Yet what is perfectly clear and positive (a positive that Gordimer does not overuse) is Aila's extraordinary evolution. Although she was formerly entirely dependent on her husband, she now decides everything for herself, and asks nobody's advice, not even on weighty matters.

The remarkable thing is that neither Sonny nor Will have any idea about the activities of their wife and mother: Aila prepares to take part in the underground movement in conspiracy with her daughter Baby, who herself went abroad some time earlier in order to fight apartheid from outside South Africa's borders. This leap to freedom is truly a female affair, and Gordimer delights in showing us that the female way is both more discreet and more efficient than the male. The fact that Aila is given important tasks in such a short time is testimony to the trust that the leadership of the movement places in her. And she never breathes a word about any of this, even when her activities are made public. Sonny, on the other hand, as seen at the height of his career, is happy to use high-sounding rhetoric, undoubtedly sincere, but no less typical.

Even though Aila and Sonny are contemporaries, the same difference exists between them as does between Rosa and her father in *Burger's Daughter*. In this way, the relationship between words and action is not only a matter of generational differences, but also of male/female differences.

Aila does not inform Sonny when she becomes an underground activist, or when, with astonishing boldness, she flees the country to escape the law. This would understandably alarm and disempower Sonny. It is also clear that Aila's complete independence affects him because she is ousting him from the typical male role. He is dispossessed of the knowledge of revolutionary activity and its underground practices, information that he thought only he possessed. He is dispossessed of the decision-making power and action, a privilege which was once his when Aila supported his every whim. Now, not only does she no longer follow his lead, but she has overtaken him. It is highly symbolic that when he finally has the opportunity to visit her in the capital of a neighbouring country where she is apparently living, she has left for Sweden the day before. On his return, very sheepishly, he has to admit this to his son.

Sonny cuts a pathetic figure when Hannah leaves him to take up an important position with the United Nations. Contrastingly, the novelist's tone is tinged with irony when Sonny claims that he will return to Aila, and live with her again as a married couple. As he says, he wants 'Aila [. . .] to be reinstated as his wife' (1990, 258), and it does not enter his mind that perhaps Aila does not wish to take up this role again. Indeed, she decides otherwise, and just as Sonny claims to have everything in hand, he finds that there is nothing left – Aila and the situation have slipped from his grasp. His fingers enclose nothingness, and he finds himself in the slightly ridiculous situation of a man who definitely did not understand what was going on. Once the representative of masculine authority, he is now taunted by this role, even though the two women in his life have shown great sensitivity towards him and his unavoidable suffering.

Could it be that Sonny's two relationships broke up because both women realised that he was too weak to be helped and that he was also an obstacle to their own need (or desire) for action? In fact, Sonny's affair

with Hannah shows that he needs another life beyond himself. Yet, by seeking complete fulfilment, he risks everything in an uncertain gamble and ends up with nothing. Not only is Sonny weak, but he is also unaware of exactly when 'Aila was the revolutionary' (1990, 242). It is no coincidence that both women are 'on the move'; rather it is a sign that they are in an ascendant phase, whilst Sonny is unfortunately on the decline.

The story takes place within black society shortly before its eagerly awaited emancipation. What emerges as a response to the call to action is that women advance faster than men, and that the latter have trouble keeping up. It is true that men of Sonny's generation have been exhausted by decades of difficult trials, prison terms and conflict with friends on the outside and comrades within. At fifty-two, Sonny is a tired man with every reason to slow down. The women, by contrast, take action and build their lives with that ardour that results from the long, enforced sleep from which they are now awakening. Aila is a remarkable example of one of these women: since her emancipation, she, who was always so calm and poised, demonstrates astonishing mobility, as if nothing can hold her back.

As a result of this third phase, the novel gives a very balanced account of South Africa in 1990. It could also be said that the couple is threatened by an outburst of female vitality. This applies especially to black women, whose status in traditional European middle-class culture was particularly diminished. Yet, those white women who do make correct political choices also benefit. Take Hannah, who, we are told, is a very ordinary woman without any distinguishing features, but who moves her life beyond the banal to encompass a global dimension.

In South Africa, as elsewhere, the contradictory nature of the couple is the result of historical evolution which has moved it increasingly further away from its original definition. Initially, the couple operated with the woman (either through love or submission) merging with the man to create a union. This arrangement then tries to survive in a system where women are increasingly asserting their difference, and where the outcome of reversing the arrangement is unknown. This is cause for both celebration and sorrow as the affirmation of difference does not

suppress the nostalgic desire for fusion. Furthermore, such nostalgia is stronger in those who have been beneficiaries of the former system, and weakens them under the new dispensation.

In the South African context, historical and political factors give particular weight to this reversal. As a result, were Gordimer to use bleak, vengeful, feminist discourse, she might appear to arrive after the battle has been won. As on several previous occasions, in *My Son's Story* the novelist takes note of the unique inconsistencies and weaknesses of the male gender with an insightfulness tinged with irony, although more often with tenderness.

Amongst Gordimer's many and varied portraits of South African women is one which the novelist develops as a counterweight to feminist discourse. The title alone of the novel in which this appears, evokes the idea of exception: *A Sport of Nature*. Set across several decades of contemporary African history, the novel details the compelling ascent to power of a woman who, initially, does not seem destined for success. This is the success of a woman and her *couples* (we use the plural advisedly).

A Sport of Nature

A Sport of Nature is Gordimer's most ironic novel, and its readers are often troubled by this. It is thus with a certain irony that the word 'success' must be understood, when referring to the 'success' of the sequence of couples formed by the novel's protagonist, a young white South African girl, Hillela. We see Hillela's life from the time that she is seventeen to when she is well over forty, that is, from the start of the 1960s until the second half of the 1980s. We can thus judge her life story and relationships with men over the course of a considerable period of time. Her relationships begin as soon as we meet her, when she is still a young girl, living with her aunt and having sex with her cousin Sasha, until the day when their affair is discovered, prompting Hillela's departure. When the book ends, Hillela is the wife of a former African General who has become the President of an independent African State. The thin teenager, pretty and above all desirable, has become an imposing, beautiful woman, entirely capable of fulfilling the role of First Lady at official

ceremonies. Indeed, although she is white, everyone agrees that she wears traditional African dress with as much presence as any black woman.

In the interval between these two relationships Hillela has known several men. But has she truly experienced life as part of a couple? Many of the white married women think that she has not, although admittedly they do not have the best intentions towards her. There is, however, proof that the answer to this question is unequivocally yes: with each relationship that Hillela has, beyond anonymous, once-off couplings, she lives in every respect as part of a couple. As the term suggests, this includes cohabitation, common or shared projects, a family structure and children. In fact, the real question is how all this is possible. What type of conditions (psychological but also historical) allow for this, given the difficulties and failures of the couples depicted in other novels?

On re-examination, the common characteristics that define these other couples are, in Hillela's relationships, clearly avoided, refused and bypassed as being problematic. This is obviously linked to the type of woman that she is, and which men intuitively recognise in her.

To speak of Hillela's *couples* in the plural, is, in fact, contradictory to a particular, mainly female, westernised view of the couple. By rights, the couple is unique, in the sense that one cannot be part of more than one couple at a time, and that the couple is meant to last for life. The word 'couple' does not describe simultaneous relationships or a string of short affairs. There is an essential temporal difference between a couple and an affair, which is inscribed in their very definition.

Hillela, however, debunks this in several ways: she reconciles the intensity of an affair based on powerful sexual attraction and the desire to give meaning to the couple through procreation. After the family scandal caused by her adolescent relationship with Sasha, she seems determined to experience love without guilt or secrecy, even if her partners must reckon with being married men. She is unconcerned and disinterested in their married lives and so never feels frustrated in her love for a man, whoever he may be. Hillela is characterised by a total lack of perspective or projection in time. This state is in no way painful to her; indeed, to the astonishment of others, it is her freedom. In stark contrast, Hillela

manages to reconcile this aspect of her life with being a mother, which for other women would imply the long term.

The full force of this reconciliation is evident when Hillela experiences the greatest love of her life, with Whaila, a black South African, and it lasts until he is assassinated before her very eyes because of his political activities. She lives with Whaila in an African country from where he is organising the anti-apartheid struggle. They share what Gordimer terms the provisionality of exile: 'On the bare boards of this no-place, no-time, she was an assertion of *here* and *now* in the provisionality of exile, whose inhabitants are strung between the rejected past and a future fashioned like a paper aeroplane out of manifestos and declarations' (1987, 211).

And yet, in the midst of this provisionality, Hillela sets about giving birth to what she calls her African family. Shortly after the birth of her little girl, she sees to it that she conceives a second child. She experiences intense joy at being pregnant again in spite of Whaila, who thinks that the timing is not right. One might say that procreation is Hillela's response to the precariousness of their lives, and that she is compensating for its aleatory, random nature by this act of confidence in the future. She does not rely on any abstract, idealised hope, but on the tangible reality of life.

After Whaila's death, hard times take her to several countries and various men, until she meets the General, soon to be President.[7] Hillela never once loses sight of her African family, and may well see her marriage to the President as the means of carrying out her plan. Circumstances prove that this desire is not merely physiological in nature. In fact, even though, at least at the start of their marriage, Hillela is still of childbearing age, she finds that she now has better things to do than give birth to children (all the more so since the President has already fathered several children with his black wives, and seems set on continuing with the youngest of his wives). For Hillela, his children are her children: they fall within this big family that she has always wanted. She will 'dispose' her children around her, regardless of their maternity, for any woman can give birth to a child. This conforms to the President's ideas; he 'has

seen her in a light other than that of perpetuator of a blood-line. Any woman could be that' (1987, 359). And Hillela, with her perfect ability to adapt, re-channels her desire for an African family into the framework of her new situation, that of a third wife but also that of a white spouse with an uncontested special status: 'But Hillela has not been taken in by this African family; she has disposed it around her. Hers is the non-matrilineal centre that no one resents because no one has known it could exist. She has invented it. This is not the rainbow family' (1987, 360).

This 'rainbow family' was Hillela's idea of the family that she would create with Whaila, a family that would foreshadow and be the foundation of South African society in the future. Her little girl, the only living child to whom Hillela has ever given birth, is a mixture of colours; this delights her mother and makes her want to capture all their hues: '[Hillela] did not ask [Whaila], this time, what colour he thought it would be; they would be a rainbow, their children, their many children' (1987, 241).

Hillela's fascination for differences in colour, and particularly their blending, is her personal, unique way of conceiving the black/white relationship within the couple. Yet if there is fascination in this, it is not in the fantastical sense of the term. Nor is this fascination actually fear couched in racial perversion, whereby pleasure consists in crossing forbidden boundaries. Upon contemplating her black lover, Hillela experiences enormous sensual pleasure because the colours of his skin are beautiful and diverse, and she never grows tired of admiring them closely. Moreover, because of their love, he carries within him the promise of new colours; each of their children will have a marvellous colour variation born of their blending.

Hillela's attitude towards Whaila is very different from the fantasies aroused by Sonny's 'blonde' in *My Son's Story*. Hillela does not fantasise; eyes wide open, she feasts upon these very real differences, demystifying them without denying their fascination. In spite of themselves, Sonny and Hannah fall into the clichés of the couple. These clichés are exacerbated by apartheid (and have also been reappropriated by Frantz Fanon and others in a bid to denounce their consequences). Hillela, however, has only one word to say on the matter, very simply and truthfully: 'our

colour', the colour of the baby that is already in her womb. It should be acknowledged that, for Hillela, colour differences are not reserved for love affairs which exclude procreation, but are more a way for the procreating couple to project itself into the future.

So many positive observations and so few obstacles might lead one to declare that, by some miracle, the impossible has occurred – the problems of the couple have been overcome. On this occasion Gordimer takes pleasure in squashing what elsewhere she might have turned into tragically painful obstacles. The question that must be asked, then, is at what price does such a miracle occur, and what does it involve? We know that the exception does not prove the rule. However, it can, and often has, been used in a utopian sense to imagine the best-case scenario, were the roots of evil to be completely eliminated.

In white South African society, Hillela is the exception. She is neither a typical middle-class woman like her aunt Olga, nor a progressive anti-apartheid activist like her aunt Pauline. From the start, she seems marginalised, doomed by her mother's death and her father's inconsistency to a kind of subconscious excess, which is also her way of surviving. She does not carry within her any model which is likely to govern or restrict her, nor does she have any unique features; she knows only what she is *not*, and does not need to affirm this through any act of free will. The absence of any special features makes Hillela the ideal utopian character, highly malleable because nothing holds her back. In this, she is like the newly independent African states with which, in fact, her story merges symbolically: it begins in 1961 and ends with the ultimate victory, the proclamation of an independent South Africa.

Hillela is a white woman who lives in the same way that black African men do, with no temporality other than the Struggle and its expected victory and with no desire other than to affirm life (a word which to African women means, first and foremost, sexuality and childbirth). Take, for example, the female viewpoint that Hillela expresses in a conversation with Whaila, who despite being African, does not support her view:

> Whaila: *'You don't really want a whole lot of kids to cart around with us from country to country. God knows where we'll have to go next.'*
> Hillela: *'An African wife isn't a wife if she doesn't produce children.'*
> Whaila: *'Oh my god, Hillela, is that what's on your mind! [. . .] I've got enough children, already, that I never see. I'm satisfied to have just this one here with us.' She was not offended by the reminder that another woman had supplied him with sons.* (1987, 220–21)

The reason why Hillela is not offended by the existence of the other woman (of whom she knows practically nothing), is that, for her, childbirth is not really personalised; she does not seek personal validation through it. From a European perspective, on the other hand, one understands just how much the birth of children is linked to individualism, even if this refers to the dual individualism of the couple.

This difference becomes even clearer at the end of the book when Hillela establishes her African family with the children of the President's two other wives. Hillela has absolutely no difficulty in accepting the polygamous family; on the contrary, she adapts to it very well. It could be said that, being the white spouse whose husband allows her to do practically anything she pleases, she has a special status anyway. However, it is known only too well that in Africa (and Gordimer alludes to various feminist symposia), polygamy is seen by many women, particularly the more 'developed', as a painfully problematic issue. Hillela again resolves this problem as an African woman, with provocative, almost disturbing ease. It is provocation from the novelist herself, rather than her character.

In effect, Gordimer's attitude seems to be this: what would happen if all the seemingly insurmountable, tragic problems of the couple were resolved, or rendered nonexistent? What if one admitted not only that one person can be part of several couples (for as long as her/his sexual activity continues) but also that couples can coexist simultaneously in a harmonious way? If this were to happen, then the problem of the couple would effectively be resolved – assuming, that is, that the word 'couple' can still be applied in this case.

Gordimer evidently does not think that this stage can be reached by everyone in white society. Yet, she clearly demonstrates how Hillela's

power of attraction over her partners is linked to this utopia. Hillela herself certainly gives them the impression that this is the case (at least for her). The most enlightening moments in this regard, and described by Gordimer in an overtly ironic tone, occur at the start of Hillela's ascent to power when she is with various white men whom she makes extraordinarily happy. One of them, a psychiatrist, is so used to encountering tortured people that he finds Hillela miraculous: 'Oh my god, Hillela, you are so healthy it appals me! It's wonderful. I don't know where they got you from' (1987, 126). It is no coincidence that this man is a psychiatrist, better informed than anyone else about what makes so many people unwell and, in particular, their inability to deal with the passage of time. His experience enables him to see immediately how Hillela is miraculously different: 'She was there, for him, without a past before yesterday and a future beyond tomorrow (she had just announced it), unlike those bowed under the past, and in such anticipatory dread that they were, as she rightly observed, unable to look up and eat, learn, fuck in the present at all' (1987, 126–27). Through Hillela, the relationship with time – one of most common human problems and one which afflicts couples in particular – can be defined. Perhaps it is an illusion, but the effects are real.

The other illusion which leads couples to torture themselves mercilessly is the need for monogamy. Hillela's great strength comes from being very quickly initiated into sex. And as Gordimer so frequently states, because of its biological nature, sex is not directed towards the other as a person, but concerns the entire species. By adopting this perspective, Hillela avoids clouding sexual relationships with notions of deceit and betrayal. Of course, this attitude also acts as a magical wave of the wand, which turns tragedy into perfect happiness: take, for example, Gordimer's ironic description of the happiness that Hillela brings to the ambassadorial couple. This, despite the fact that Hillela's position as 'governess to their children' and 'friend of the family' consists, in essence, of being the Ambassador's mistress. Thanks to Hillela, everything is simplified and ordinary worries disappear.

Gordimer takes advantage of this to depict the Ambassador as a type of Don Juan who has fallen prey to that common European illness, classically

known as 'marital problems'. In his obsessive need to check that he is not abiding by the rules, Don Juan is a man who falls ill because of the restrictiveness of monogamy. This is also a way of making us understand that Hillela is not a female Don Juan; she is not driven by anxiety, nor does she set out to seduce – she does not need to.

Hillela is a sport of nature because she does not experience any of the things which make the couple so problematic, even though this is the most widespread, or perhaps the only, way of life. In European society, one is either wife or mistress; this is what the Ambassador's wife says very clearly with regard to Hillela's marriage to Whaila, the black man: 'To be one wife among several, the way the Africans do it – that's to be a mistress, isn't it? So she fits in, in her way, with a black man's family. Hillela's a natural mistress, not a wife' (1987, 205). For the Ambassador's wife, there is only one type of couple, other variations do not exist.

Moreover, this is also a male viewpoint, and Hillela knows all too well that white men see things this way. Even though she forms a very united and loving couple with Bradley, the American who wants to marry her, she says to him one day upon returning from a trip, 'Brad, I don't think you should marry me. I've been with Reuel, on and off, when I was in Africa. I don't think you'd be able to – well, to manage with that' (1987, 306). Indeed, he is not able to manage with that, and the moment signals the end of his dream family.

Hillela's polymorphic sexuality is incompatible with the archetypal European couple. Does this mean that the African couple is fundamentally different, and that Gordimer is seriously asking us to consider this alternative in order to draw fresh inspiration? The book ends with Hillela settling happily into marriage with the President. We already know that this couple is not based on monogamy, as it occurs within a polygamous system. But it is also not exactly polygamous either, if one considers the relationship between Hillela and her husband to be like that of a European couple: 'The President has never deserted his wife's bed, even during the pursuit of passing fancies; and she has never ceased to please and, still, surprise him – for him, there is no one like her. She must

have had several affairs of her own [. . .]. And if, after all, the President has some ideas that a woman he continues to find so attractive may attract and not resist another man, from time to time – well, Chiemeka (Hillela) is not like other women, she is a match for him in this way as in all others.' (1987, 386).

It is tempting to attribute this to the wisdom of African women. It certainly places the couple out of tragedy's reach, and on the side of comedy, or even farce; (Hillela laughs raucously when she and her daughter discuss the nicknames of one of the President's white mistresses). It brings to mind another mother/daughter relationship involving a father's affair in *My Son's Story*, when Baby, Sonny's daughter, slits her wrists in despair because of her father's affair with Hannah. That story also takes place against a backdrop that is just as black as it is African, if not more so. Sonny's family is very influenced by European culture, which is another way of saying that the problem is not geographical but cultural. Many factors are involved, some of them social: Sonny's family personifies virtuous middle-class morality, the President and his wife indulge in the liberties taken by the important, powerful people of this world. As Gordimer writes, they are 'symbolic figures', adding that this 'surely [. . .] means a good combination of accommodation' (1987, 386).

Given the novelist's irony here, the success of the presidential couple (which can be compared to the President's success as the head of an African State) is being called into question. The reference to political 'accommodation', since this is Gordimer's word, means that the ending of the novel should be read with great caution. In this State where, God willing, everything is going well, it is evident that democratic scruples are not at the top of the agenda and that there are excellent prisons where 'enemies of the people' can be prevented from doing harm. Gordimer previously referred to this in *A Guest of Honour*, and her new President certainly resembles one of her previous characters, Mweta. So the notion of 'accommodation' is, in fact, easily understood: it is actually a return to tried and tested methods of governance, the type that allows those in authority to hold on to their power (and the advantages that accompany it) for as long as possible.

Accommodation in public life, accommodation in private life. The latter is certainly not a new phenomenon; it is a recipe that has enabled the marital couple to endure for at least two centuries, despite the kind of dramas recounted in Gordimer's novels. Hillela has lived more freely than the majority of white women of her social class. This does not mean that she will not 'settle down' and return to a way of life as a couple which conforms to what is currently, and has for a long time been the norm for someone of her social standing.

Does this mean that everything that she has experienced previously becomes null and void? Surely not. Something of what was experienced before the return to order must surely remain. Gordimer uses Hillela in the context of several of her own most cherished projects. Now a hybridised black/white woman, Hillela has the sturdiness of the hybrid. In this sense she refutes what was taking place in South Africa when the novel was written, a country that has always been fiercely opposed to colour mixing. As a hybridised wife and mistress, she is also an ironic denial of those couples that one reads about in novels, including Gordimer's own. She is a useful reminder that if the couple is vulnerable and fragile, it is because it tries to incorporate both the concept of the individual and the impersonal nature of sex. Moreover, as undeniable as the problems of the couple are, they are cultural and historical and thus susceptible to change. This is a way of saying that transformation is underway and that hybridisation must be trusted.

4

Something Else Out There

To read Gordimer's novels through the systems of opposition that they bring out in both collective history and individual daily life is not to betray them. And yet this undertaking is somehow in danger of being reductive. Even though these systems are not abstract (they weave together life in all its forms, material, physical and moral), one could say that they occasionally let something essential slip through the web. This 'something' is often only alluded to, but at other times it is more developed. One could almost qualify it as metaphysical because it concerns the way in which the meaning of life is perceived, regardless of the conflicts and reconciliations of daily life.

Beyond the day-to-day, beyond the ideological, and beyond history, there is 'something' which puts all of these in perspective. In Gordimer's work this 'something' can be classified into two main categories. Firstly, there is everything that is connected with the thought of death, and which is thus a definition of man through his mortality. Secondly, there is everything that is associated with artistic creation, which goes beyond the historical world towards an essence which is not of that world.

Although death is often present in Gordimer's novels,[1] the thought of it is much less present in her characters' behaviour. By way of example, the presence of death in *The Conservationist* will be analysed. Artistic creation is rarely evoked: there is only one character who is a writer in Gordimer's novels, and he is in fact only a *potential* writer (Will in *My Son's Story*). We will, then, refer only to *Burger's Daughter* and will examine the way

in which Rosa perceives the artistic creation of an artist like Bonnard, whose painting she discovers during her stay in the south of France.

Through these brief analyses and comments, the challenge will be to discover whether it is possible to get beyond the contingent and historical of the human condition. The South African context that Gordimer depicts in her work is unpromising in this regard; any move beyond the contingent seems unlikely. However, it is all the more valuable to know that in another place and another time, escaping history might be the meaning of life. Human beings must be themselves, *hic et nunc*, because determining factors force them to be so, but they should not forget that there is another world out there.

Nature and Death

> *'Being here; we don't know who-dun-it. But something satisfying, if not the answer, can be invented.'* [2]

In Gordimer's early novels, such as *The Late Bourgeois World*, death as an uncontrollable inevitability is already present. The thought of death goes beyond the problems with which the characters wrestle, but it is also intimately linked to them. Metaphysically, this follows on from living *hic et nunc* and placing oneself in the physical world, traditionally termed as 'nature'. The novel in which the link between nature and death is particularly noticeable is also politically charged, as its title, *The Conservationist*, indicates. We shall thus seek to understand what this 'something beyond' signifies, and more specifically, what it means to Mehring, the main protagonist of the novel.

The Conservationist

When Mehring added managing a farm to his list of activities, he surely did not realise why, or to what extent, he would grow attached to the land. In fact, the idea was that this farm would be a place to bring a woman on occasions. This does not happen, but something else occurs, and the veld, that countryside with no particular beauty, begins to exert

a powerful attraction over Mehring. It is a harsh landscape, but Gordimer imbues her character with her own appreciation of its secret softness: 'The winter landscape of the high-veld is supposed traditionally to be harsh but here it is harsh only to the touch – the bristles of broken grass tussocks, the prickly dead khaki-weed, the snagging knife-edge of dead reeds – everything his gaze has been resting upon [. . .] is soft and tonal. The range of distant hills is laid, pale and gentle, on the horizon. The willows, when he sees them as a destination, from the house or up on the road, are caught like smoke over the reeds' (1974, 78).

Mehring's complex personality does not, however, let him see himself as a thinker; he cannot conceive his relationship with the earth as anything but a struggle to make it productive at all costs. Thus he fights, intelligently and determinedly, against a climate (which alternates between drought and flood damage) as tough as the soil itself. It is easy to imagine how such a struggle might create a bond, a link to life and procreation, because on a practical level there is breeding, harvesting and planting. Yet Mehring's attachment is strange because, right from the start of the book, it seems to involve death.

At the very moment when Mehring first arrives at his farm, Jacobus, his induna, announces that a dead body has been found on the property, in a field close to the river. This is disturbing because the identity of the body and cause of death are unknown; moreover, no-one claims the body. The police come to inspect it, but they do not take charge, and leave it on the premises. After much waiting and prevarication, it is officially decided that the dead man must be buried where he lies since there is no better place. The suggestion is that this black man rejoins the earth because he belongs to it – or rather because *it* belongs to him – and that Mehring's shift between the physical and metaphysical is based on this intuition. Gradually, we come to understand that he loves the earth both physically and metaphysically as a symbol of reciprocal belonging: the earth belongs to man, and man to the earth.

Man, but which man? Somewhat subconsciously, Mehring first sees the man (already a cadaver and thus part of the organic matter on which his body is lying) as an allegory of death, and then as a foreshadowing of

his own death. Each time Mehring comes to the farm, he thinks increasingly of this, as if it has become clear to him that one day, he too will be buried in the earth. For this unemotional character, it is as though the earth that he is treading upon and the death that he foresees are the touchstones of an absolute truth. Mehring's attitude in this regard is analysed at two different levels: the critical woman who judiciously sees this as an ideological process to be denounced, and Gordimer herself, who depicts Mehring confronting this truth, as an unsettling human being.

Why speak of ideology here? Readers of the French author Maurice Barrès will be familiar with a formula that was very popular in his time: earth and the dead. It is one of the traditional, and traditionalist, foundations of so-called right-wing ideology, and the fact that Gordimer uses the word 'conservationist' shows that she is not against its terminology. The notion of an intangible, special bond between man and the earth wherein he will one day be buried, justifies a feeling of belonging which may have the validity of legitimate possession. This justification is all the more necessary given that white South Africans have scarcely any other means of affirming their ownership of the land. They are not indigenous, and know that others – the blacks – long preceded them. If they cannot find justification in one area, then they must look elsewhere for it. They were not born in South Africa, but at least they can die there, as death is just as sanctifying as birth. This process is ideological, in the Marxist sense of the word, that is to say that it inverts real relationships and situations. Whites like Mehring inevitably hold ideological positions because they demand their right to possess and rule over the country as if it were inscribed in the nature of things, whereas it is only too obvious, and indeed common knowledge, that it has not been theirs for all eternity.

How is it possible to deny that the blacks have been in South Africa for much longer than the whites? Gordimer ingeniously reminds us of this fact by punctuating her novel with beautiful quotations borrowed from Henry Callaway's book *The Religious System of the Amazulu*[3] which deals, among other things, with the religious systems of the Zulu, their life myths and cult of ancestor worship. These short passages enable the reader to understand how, in the poetic manner of all myth, the Zulus

express their age-old relationship with the earth upon which the whites arrived belatedly.

According to the Zulus' oldest archaic myths and beliefs, their ancestors always hunted and gathered on the earth that became the veld. The few lines dedicated to the whites in these passages are very enlightening. When the whites arrived, their missionaries replaced the ancestor worship by that of God (a word which it seems was never explained). Yet, most interesting is the relationship of both blacks and whites towards primordial matter, including the earth itself, 'We saw that, in fact, we black men came out without a single thing: we came out naked; we left everything behind because we came out first. But as for white men . . . we saw that we came out in a hurry; but they waited for all things, that they might not leave any behind' (1974, 213). A passage like this reveals an astonishing awareness of recent South African history and attitudes, and naturally it emerges that the blacks feel they have been dispossessed and tricked.

The last quotation given in *The Conservationist* is an ancestral genealogy of the kind often found amongst so-called primitive peoples. Its aim is to establish a strong relationship between the speaker (who might be only one or two generations removed from Mehring) and the most ancient ancestor, who appeared at the beginning of the world, at the moment when the earth, on which the ancestors lived, acquired a separate existence.

The purpose of these quotations is to make Mehring's demand for credibility both understandable and pathetic; even if the price for this has to be his own death, it is the only way for him to appropriate the land. The fact that Mehring accepts that this is the price he must pay makes him an unsettling character, in spite of the pertinent ideological analyses that the critical woman advances. This is all the more so since part of what she insinuates is actually unfair: she accuses him of not being in any danger because of his wealth. Yet, when Mehring is on his farm grappling with the relationship that he sees as obvious between the earth and death, he has no-one to turn to. He chooses to confront this alone, even turning down gourmet dinners in the city and all the available women there. The courage of his choice commands both respect and consideration.

We have already seen how characters and events in Gordimer's novels can be read on two levels. In *The Conservationist*, the thought of death is ambiguous. It is what creates the undeniable greatness of Mehring's character, but, at the same time, Mehring cannot refrain from making death into something ideological. And yet, perhaps there is a hierarchy between the two, because death is, so to speak, in a class of its own; the courage to confront it belongs to the Conservationist alone, whereas his interlocutors and opponents slip away each time there is danger. Reflecting upon, and coming to terms with, death by appreciating life restores balance and means that, once again, Gordimer's writing cannot be thought of as didactic or struggle literature. In this, she is much closer to Malraux, for whom death was a touchstone for evaluating his characters: Gordimer demonstrates that, beyond the correctness of her characters' political ideals and involvement in the struggle, they are aware of being mortal and thus part of something universal. Without this awareness, even the most just ideas would remain just that: ideas. When the Conservationist objects to the woman's ideas, he is only partially right. In a certain way, however, the novelist also takes his side. This is the paradox of the novel, and an opportunity perhaps to reflect upon the importance of paradox in all of Gordimer's writing. For, although the novelist believes in ideological struggle, she also holds that one must never forget that, at the heart of all struggle something else exists: there is something else out there. Out there, on the other side, out there in other parts of the world, and out there in other ways of transcending the contingency of everyday life.

On Art and Writing

> *'Perhaps there is no other way of reaching some understanding of being than through art? Writers themselves don't analyze what they do; to analyze would be to look down while crossing a canyon on a tightrope.'*[4]

Burger's Daughter

The fact that 'something else out there' exists gives all its sense to the interior dialectic which animates *Burger's Daughter*. Following the death of her parents, and in spite of her young age, Rosa's behaviour while still in South Africa can be explained by the very personal awareness that she now has of what lies beyond death. When she is in France, however, it is an entirely different matter.

Rosa has a premonition that something else exists besides the struggle waged by her parents, a something else which is essential but which her parents never knew existed. Even if one day she is to take up the struggle, she needs to know what else is out there and what other ways of life are like. When Rosa does decide to leave her country, it is not to go just anywhere; she knows exactly where she is headed and why. In fact, she goes to the south of France to meet Madame Bagnelli, Lionel's first wife, long before he married Rosa's mother.

At that time Lionel was already a militant communist, and everyone agreed that Katya, was not the right woman for him: she was too unorthodox, even anarchistic, preferring the theatre to Party meetings and was accused of a lack of discipline. It is because Rosa hears about the independence of this Katya, *alias* Colette Swan *alias* Colette Burger *alias* Madame Bagnelli, that she travels overseas to see for herself what it all means.

Why is Katya the only person whom Rosa wants to meet? It is because she hopes to understand, through this rare example, how it is possible to be detached from Lionel without ceasing to love and admire him. After Lionel's death, Katya wrote to Rosa that her father 'was a great man and yet [. . .] 'there's a whole world' outside what he lived for' (1979, 272). By coming to stay with Katya, Rosa hopes to discover this 'whole world' which is known to her only through what it is not. She discovers it, in fact, in several ways but mainly through two apparent opposites: life in the present and artistic creation.

These two aspects mix in a delightful way in Katya's daily life, as Rosa realises during the journey from the airport in Nice to Madame Bagnelli's house. Katya is behind the wheel, making conversation as she drives, 'Oh that – fort, château, same thing, all their castles were fortifications. That's

Antibes. We'll go one day – the Picasso museum's inside [. . .] don't worry, we'll make it, I must just stop for bread – are you hungry? I hope you've got a good appetite' (1979, 221-2). Such is daily life with Katya, who derives permanent pleasure from taking advantage of the world as it is. Rosa discovers the euphoria of carefree superficiality and frivolity. Since we know what Rosa's life was like up until now, it is obvious that her own family life differed dramatically from this; being activists meant incessant anguish, and the impossibility of being available for anything other than the Struggle. To live differently is, in simple parlance, to live a life that others would call normal – and which is a far cry from life in South Africa.

The magnitude of the transformation enables Rosa, more than anyone else, to appreciate and savour the pleasures of letting be, that feather-light feeling of trouble-free tranquillity. For Rosa, this state of innocence looks, as Gordimer puts it, like paradise lost: 'The innocence and security of being open to lives all around was the emotion to which champagne and more wine, drunk with the meal, attached itself. All about Rosa Burger, screened only by traceries of green and the angles of houses, people sat eating or talking, fondling, carrying out tasks – a man planing wood and a couple leaning close in deep discussion, and the susurration of voices was as little threatened by exposure as the swish of shavings curling. People with nothing to hide from, no one to elude, careless of privacy, in their abundance: letting be' (1979, 230).

Rosa undoubtedly feels better; this life makes her happy. She discovers that there is a certain way of letting be from which happiness emanates. Perhaps it is because her existence is now free from politics and ideas. And yet, these elements are actually present in the milieu that Rosa frequents, but Gordimer very humorously and lightly evokes just what politics mean in France. Politics, French-style, is a recreational activity which is pleasurable and gratifying for those taking part; there is no seriousness to it, but merely lots of intelligent, theoretical debates without any real responsibility or commitment.

Rosa meets some people in Katya's entourage who are representative of the French left wing. Among them is Bernard Chabalier, a schoolteacher by profession, who despite being married is available for a sexual relationship to develop between him and Rosa. Although some debates

are certainly interesting (the distinction between traditional right-wing anti-sovietism and the new left-wing anti-sovietism, for example), Rosa has lived too close to the action and is not intellectual enough to get anything from them. Moreover, Bernard Chabalier is sufficiently self-critical to explain that the left wing should not be taken too seriously, 'You don't know how careful we are, we French Leftist Bourgeoisie. So much set aside every month, no possibility of living dangerously' (1979, 283).

There are many reasons why Rosa thinks that this other world, and other way of life, have nothing to do with politics. Politics is what Lionel and his kind experienced, and what she has always known in her own country. Since Rosa is deeply connected with history, the other world that she seeks must, on the contrary, disregard historical events. Only a certain conception of art can bring this out to the full.

Rosa notices this because she attends art exhibitions with Bernard Chabalier, with the idea that 'In Africa, one goes to see the people. In Europe, it's pictures' (1979, 294). The humorous manner in which this difference is conveyed does not in any way lessen the seriousness of the lines that follow and which enable us to understand what people are hoping to find when they go to exhibitions. Rosa is filled with wonder at the way in which Bonnard's paintings are so similar to the objects and people in Katya's entourage. Bernard explains that, in both instances, it is indeed the same way of escaping historical time: 'This woman here stepping through the leaves, and this mimosa – the woman he painted in eighteen-ninety-four (look in the catalogue, it's written) the mimosa in '45 during the war, during the Occupation, yes? All right. In the fifty years between the two paintings, there was the growth of fascism, two wars – the Occupation – And for Bonnard it is as if nothing's happened. Nothing. Look at them . . . He could have painted them the same summer, the same day' (1979, 294–95).

Thus we find the idea, which is also present in the writings of Proust and Malraux, that art – and only art – transcends time. The feelings that this transcendence may arouse in Gordimer and her heroine remain to be discovered.

For Rosa, ignoring history means ignoring what is going on in South Africa, in the same way that the majority of French people (even the

so-called leftists) with whom she mixes ignore history. In all likelihood, this 'ignorance' does not occur on a factual level; it is more on the level of a real understanding of problems and opposing forces. In a way, Rosa has found what she wanted: a world that disregards the Cause for which Lionel lived. Yet, from the very moment that she is no longer under pressure to remain within the bounds of activism, she can choose freely to return to what really concerns her. This is why, in spite of her plans to be Bernard Chabalier's mistress, she goes back to South Africa via London to become a militant.

Does this mean that in 1979 (the year that *Burger's Daughter* was published) there was no other world possible for South Africans? Rosa ultimately believes that there is in fact no option but to continue the struggle. Yet her conviction has acquired a new dimension because she now knows that outside of this necessary political conflict there is a 'whole world', which poor Lionel did not even know existed. This is why she writes to Madame Bagnelli from prison. Even though we know very little about the letter, the very act of sending it is significant: Rosa has not forgotten, she knows that even the worst that can happen will not change the colour or scent of the mimosas.

Gordimer's position as a novelist is a complex one. In effect, the South African situation is such that the very act of writing can never be 'pure'. The writer has a responsibility that cannot be shirked, and Gordimer could never function the way Bonnard does, by disregarding events. However, it is also true that art has no meaning unless it moves beyond experience: 'The *transformation of experience* remains the writer's basic essential gesture; the lifting out of a limited category something that reveals its full meaning and significance only when the writer's imagination has expended it' (1988, 298). This is Gordimer's definitive formulation of her thoughts in a 1988 text entitled *The Essential Gesture*. In the act of writing, as in other areas, the writer must try to move between two contradictory imperatives, 'creative self-absorption and conscionable awareness' (1988, 299). It is these seemingly contradictory, yet also complementary, attitudes which will form the subject matter of our final analysis of Gordimer, a storyteller whose books are both tragic and ironic.

5

Conclusion: Betrayal and Irony

'[. . .] [T]he intense inner concentration the writer must have to cross the chasms of the aleatory and make them the word's own, as an explorer plants a flag.'[1]

Some readers may perhaps be disappointed that Gordimer's fiction does not contain truly pathetic situations which cause tears to be shed for the victim and indignation to be felt towards the executioner. It is true that Gordimer resolutely avoids anything to do with melodrama, a genre in which traditionally everything is black and white; in the South African context this would be the height of facility. She aims to demonstrate how her country's unique circumstances have created tragic, even fatal, situations for those characters who are unable to grasp its meanings and contradictions. Nothing is so far removed from melodrama as tragedy. We will also observe, for a last time, how in her narrative Gordimer replaces the tragic sentiment, often found in the theatrical genre, by 'self-irony'. In conclusion, we will comment on Gordimer's short stories, as a means of appreciating, on a small scale, those situations which inform her novels.

Betrayal: Selected Short Stories

Some Are Born to Sweet Delight, Oral History, A City of the Dead, A City of the Living, Jump

The theme of betrayal exposes the way in which historical situations like apartheid make it impossible to be an individual with clear-cut emotions which dictate a single course of action.

In Gordimer's fiction, one would expect to find stories illustrating the way in which blacks and whites are led to deceive each other because of the underground struggle that puts them on opposing sides. Deception can, however, have horrific consequences when it betrays even the most naïve and passionate feelings. Take, for example, a young woman's love for her husband, the father to her child, who, in fact, is merely using her as a pawn in his terrorist activities – and she will be the first victim. This is the subject of a short story entitled 'Some Are Born to Sweet Delight', found in the collection *Jump and Other Stories.* Vera, a young Englishwoman of modest means, falls in love with Rad, a foreigner whom her parents have taken on as a lodger in their home. Completely besotted, she soon falls pregnant and contemplates an abortion until he says 'You will have the baby. We will marry' (1991, 82). Vera feels great pride when he decides to send her to visit his own family, so that his parents can get to know her. Rad drives her to the airport and at the last minute slips a gift for his family into her hand luggage. The device explodes in mid-air over the sea and everyone is killed. The enquiry reveals nothing until another similar disaster occurs for which responsibility is claimed by a member of the same group to which Rad belongs.

In this story, a particular brand of terrorism is harshly, even violently, criticised. Yet, above all, the story demonstrates the incommensurable divide between those who believe in the sincerity of their feelings and those who ignore all other considerations in favour of what they term political ideas. The conflict between these two creeds creates victims like Vera, whose story inspires the tragic sentiments of terror and pity.

This is not the only kind of deception; deception also occurs between blacks and other blacks, and between whites and other whites. Gordimer's

short stories provide some examples of the former when blacks denounce their own kind to whites, with disastrous consequences. In 'Oral History' (*A Soldier's Embrace*), a village chief gives in to the pressure of the white soldiers who regularly come to interrogate him about the rebellion in the area. One day, he goes to the army post and denounces a group of terrorists in hiding in his village. He spends the night with a cousin but upon returning to the village, he discovers that everything has been destroyed and that everyone has either died or fled. He hangs himself on the still smoking ruins, leaving behind only the bicycle that he rode to get to the white soldiers.

In this short story, Gordimer is highly elliptical; beyond a few suggestions she does not elaborate on the reasons that drove the chief to act as he did. However, in another story of denunciation, 'A City of the Dead, A City of the Living' (*Something Out There*), her analysis is much more detailed, albeit somewhat allusive. In an overcrowded township, a man temporarily hides and shelters a friend who 'is in trouble' (1984, 14) and needs to stay in hiding. The man's wife intelligently participates in the arrangements that must be made, and shares the housework with the clandestine lodger. However, one day she announces that she needs to go to the shops to buy milk for the baby, but goes instead to the police station to denounce this man. She may well claim, 'I don't know why I did it' (1984, 26), for her behaviour is indeed hard to understand. Was the extreme overcrowding in the township the reason that she did not want her husband to bring the man to their home? Did she want to punish her husband or make a show of her own independence? Or did she wish to guard against the growing desire which this man aroused in her? It brings to mind what he, a real militant who is aware of the horror of the situation they are all caught up in, once said: 'We're shut up in the ghetto to kill each other. That's what they want, in their white city' (1984, 24).

The detail of these tragedies may differ but the tragic force is always implacable. We also see whites betraying whites, when they allow themselves to be used by blacks, who abandon them after they are no longer of any use. This is the subject of the short story 'Jump', which appears in

the collection of the same name, *Jump and Other Stories*. The unfortunate hero is a young white man of modest background, brought up by low-ranking, apolitical civil servants. By mistake, and purely by chance, he collaborates with a secret organisation aimed at re-establishing white rule in the now independent country. Yet once he realises that these people are criminals, he goes to the black government and, in the course of several press conferences and television interviews, reveals all the information he possesses. The time comes, however, when he no longer has anything left to say, and nobody is interested in him any more. From the window of the hotel where he lives as a recluse, he dreams of the jump that may be his only escape.

It is clear that here Gordimer is thinking of the tragic situation of those whites who have had the courage to betray what was supposedly their cause, and who (in some awkward way) wanted the blacks to benefit from their 'betrayal'. They were unaware but acted out of conviction, until they realised that their very difficult choice in no way earned them the appreciation of those whom they had benefited, but rather a slightly condescending mistrust. With great skill, Gordimer demonstrates that this is the fate of barely politicised whites who are incapable of fighting for their convictions and incurring rejection or isolation in the way that Rosa Burger does. They are victims of history, caught up in rapidly changing historical events, in which they are incapable of finding their place.

Self-Irony

A Soldier's Embrace

Although these stories are tragic, they are also the high points of another attack mounted by Gordimer, but using a different tone, that of irony. This derisory tone is well-suited to the situations that she often evokes in her short stories and novels, the main purpose of which is to challenge even the most just and valiant ideas. South Africa's recent history is filled with 'self-ironies' which give Gordimer's fiction the unique quality of

being a warning both to herself and to her readers. For it is sometimes difficult to accept the obvious. Thus Gordimer positions herself where belief and observation diverge. If deep disappointments are to be survived and belief retained, then great insight is a must.

Men are mortal, yet history continues. Given this certainty, one can conceive of both the sincerity of feelings and their changeability, the seriousness of events and their insignificance. A single example illustrates this idea; it is a short story found in the collection *A Soldier's Embrace*. The country described in the story at the time of independence is not South Africa, as this collection was published in 1980. Of course, Gordimer's fondness for prediction is well known and is the subject of the novel *July's People*. The characters in A *Soldier's Embrace* are a white liberal couple who have worked on the side of the blacks throughout the struggle; the husband, a lawyer, has done all he could for them. As in *A Guest of Honour*, their good friend, a black man, is an important member of government upon his return from exile. On the very same day as the euphoric independence celebrations, the wife finds herself in the street, hand in hand with a white soldier on one side and a black soldier on the other. It is a marvellous promise of things to come. One can, however, guess what will actually occur. After the welcome departure of certain dubiously rich whites, the ordinary people start to leave too: for example, the shopkeepers who fear that their stores will be looted. Finally, 'It was something quite unexpected and outside their own efforts that decided it' (1980, 20). The lawyer is offered an attractive job in an overseas country, and since their black friend has taken no notice of them for a year, there is nothing to hold them back, '. . . twenty-one years of life in that house gone quite easily into one pantechnicon' (1980, 22).

This story is exemplary of the gulf that exists between the sincerest of feelings and subsequent, unrelated behaviour. In the interval, the weight of determinism (which, as Marx explained so well, creates the reality in which we live) has played out. Gordimer is both a humanist who believes in human freedom, and an observer who sees that freedom is limited. Its limitations can be experienced and portrayed as tragedy, or conveyed through irony. Reality often betrays our best intentions; it

even betrays expectations and reason. But we can also thwart the hands of fate. The very word, betrayal, means that sometimes we are prey to horrific events, but sometimes we can act freely in spite of determinism. Horror is the negative side of freedom. How can one not be ironic when good and bad are separated by so very little?

Whether horrible, or merely distressing, reality provokes us because it ridicules our thoughts and feelings so as to impose its own determinisms and laws. We must guard against falling into its traps. The more invasive it seems, the more we must keep it at bay. It is a matter of tone, the tone of a writer who plants her words in the real world 'as an explorer plants a flag.'[2]

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* The first date indicates when the work was originally published in English, whereas the second refers to the date of publication of the French translation.

Translators' Notes

Throughout this translation, additional footnotes and bibliographic references have been included to enable a fuller reading of Brahimi's original text.

Preface

1 Claude Wauthier is a journalist and author of books on African affairs. Works such as *Mémoires d'Afrique (1981–1998): entretiens avec Claude Wauthier* (with Guy Penne), *L'Afrique des Africains* and *Sectes et prophètes d'Afrique noire* have earned him his place as respected authority on Africa. He is also a talented translator of novelists such as Sebastian Barry and Elizabeth Strout.

Preamble

1 The title of the first short story in Gordimer's 1953 collection *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, translated into French by Jean Sévry in his anthology of South African literature, *Afrique du Sud. Ségrégation et littérature*, which was published by l'Harmattan (Paris) in 1992.

2 Louvel, Liliane. 1994. *Nadine Gordimer*. Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy.

3 Brahimi's literary portraits of Maghrebi and African women (*Maghrébines. Portraits littéraires*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995 and *Les femmes dans la littérature africaine, portraits*, Paris: Karthala, 1998) spring to mind. For details of Brahimi's books and articles, consult the following website: http://dzlit.free.fr/dbrahimi.html.

4 Brahimi, Denise. 2000. *Nadine Gordimer la femme, la politique et le roman*, Paris: IFAS – Karthala.

5 For her novel *The Conservationist*.

6 Winner of the best book category for the 2002 Commonwealth Writers' Prize in the Africa region.

7 Nominated for the 2006 Man Booker Prize.

8 The quasi-autobiographical text *The Next-to-Last Will and Testament of Madame Y.*, with which Ronald Suresh Roberts closes his biography of Gordimer, remains unpublished.

9 On the occasion of the third ministerial conference devoted to cultural diversity, Bernard Magnier reflected on the last decade of the twentieth century and termed it 'the decade of African translation'. The complete press release is available on http://confculture.francophonie.org/dossierpresse/doc11.cfm

10 Roberts, Ronald Suresh. 2005. *No Cold Kitchen. A Biography of Nadine Gordimer.* Johannesburg: STE.

11 In 1990, at a public lecture on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of Natal, Nadine Gordimer spoke of her discovery as a teenager in the Springs municipal library of the founder of the modern French novel, Proust. Cf article by Serge Ménager, translated by Vanessa Everson 'Proust among the Cannibals', *Theoria*, Vol 77, May 1991, pp 143 – 151.

12 In the hope of achieving complete impartiality, no capital letters have been used in this translation for adjectives or nouns indicating racial or ethnic affiliations.

13 Incidentally, Denise Brahimi is not one of those overseas readers who have mistakenly interpreted *The House Gun* as a crime novel.

Introduction

1 Gordimer, N. 'Nobel Lecture'. 7 December 1991. *Nobel Prize.org.* http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1991/gordimer-lecture.html.

2 At the time Brahimi's work of literary criticism was written (2000), Gordimer had only published two novels after 1991, but she has since published more novels, essays and short stories (*Living in Hope and History: Notes from Our Century*, Bloomsbury, 1999; *The Pickup*, Bloomsbury, 2001; *Loot*, Bloomsbury, 2003; *Telling Tales* (editor), Bloomsbury, 2004; *Get A Life*, Bloomsbury, 2005).

3 Proust, M. 1958. *Marcel Proust on Art and Literature, 1896–1919.* Trans. Townsend Warner, S. Greenwich, CT: Meridian Books.

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6 Fanon, F. 1952/1967. *Black Skin, White Masks.* Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press.

7 In France, *July's People* is probably the most respected and best known of Gordimer's novels.

8 Gordimer, N. 'Nobel Lecture'. 7 December 1991. *Nobel Prize.org.*

Journey Through History

1 Gordimer, N. 1995. *Writing and Being.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

2 Montesquieu, C. 1899. *Persian Letters. Trans.* John Davidson. London: Gibbings.

3 Poe, E.A. 1938. *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe.* New York: Random House.

Forty Years On

1 Gordimer, N. 1995. *Writing and Being*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. 134.
2 Oz, A. 1991/1993. *Fima*. Trans. Nicholas de Lange. Great Britain: Vintage. 220.
3 Girard, R. 1972/1977. *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Man-woman, Black-White: The Coexistence of Opposites

1 Gordimer, N. 1988. *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*. Ed. Clingman, S. Great Britain: Cape. 276-7.
2 Gordimer, N. 1995. *Writing and Being*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. 127.
3 Baudelaire, C. 1962. *Flowers of Evil: Poems of Baudelaire*. Ed. Friedman, F.L. London: Elek Books.
4 This is surely a reference to the French philosopher and Sorbonne professor, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939), who turned his interest in logic towards the role of emotions in the psychic life of native peoples. The anthropologist countered the 'rationalism' associated with Durkheimian sociology prevalent at the time by arguing that ways of thinking vary from one society to another. Despite criticisms of his theory that primitive thought is 'pre-logical' and 'mystical', and indeed his own repudiation of this thesis, his work has been widely acknowledged as a treatment of modes of thought (J. Cazenave, *Lucien Lévy-Bruhl*, New York: Harper, 1972).
5 Gordimer, N. 1995. *Writing and Being*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. 115.
6 Fanon, F. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.
7 This translation respects Gordimer's use of capital letters to designate certain characters by their professional status and not by name, as in 'the President' or 'the Ambassador' (147).

Something Else Out There

1 Including in *The House Gun* (1998), the last novel to be published prior to Brahimi's critique.
2 Gordimer, N. 'Nobel Lecture'. 7 December 1991. *Nobel Prize.org*. http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1991/gordimer-lecture.html
3 Callaway, H. 1913. *The Religious System of the Amazulu*. Natal, South Africa: Mariannhill Mission Press.
4 Gordimer, N. 'Nobel Lecture'. 7 December 1991. *Nobel Prize.org*. http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1991/gordimer-lecture.html

Conclusion: Betrayal and Irony

1 Gordimer, N. 'Nobel Lecture'. 7 December 1991. *Nobel Prize.org*. http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1991/gordimer-lecture.html
2 Gordimer, N. 'Nobel Lecture'. 7 December 1991. *Nobel Prize.org*. http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1991/gordimer-lecture.html

Index