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Nadine Gordimer: Nobel Laureate in Literature, 1991

By BARBARA J. ECKSTEIN The world literary community has noted each year the prevailing tastes and proclivities of the Nobel jury.¹ So rare was the choice of the Nigerian Wole Soyinka in 1986, for example, that it evoked comment from many quarters.² John Kwan-Terry has speculated on the reasons for the exclusion of Chinese names from the list of winners.³ The paucity of women recipients is no less cause for speculation. In addition, commentary on the Nobel Prize traditionally includes the observation voiced here by John Banville: "The committee has always appeared distinctly chary of anything that smacks of art for art's sake, preferring its literature well salted with political or social concerns."⁴ Alfred Nobel's stipulation that his money reward literature of benefit to mankind [*sic*] and many of the jury's choices through the years do contribute to this perennial observation that artists' artists (e.g., Borges and Nabokov) do not win the Nobel Prize. Writers' and critics' common assumption that esthetic experiment and political commitment are incompatible is, however, equally responsible for this Nobel lore. The jury's awarding of the Nobel Prize to Nadine Gordimer in 1991 provides an opportunity not only to congratulate her for a reward earned through a lifetime's work but also to challenge the assumption separating esthetic complexity and political engagement.

Gordimer's receipt of the award in 1991, rather than earlier, speaks to the recent negotiations of the South African apartheid regime and leaders of the black majority population. The overt white supremacy practiced by the South African government has long been, at the very least, an embarrassment to Europeans and other people of primarily European descent, regardless of our own sins. Until that embarrassment had reason to abate, or seemed to,⁵ no white South African living in material comfort in South Africa, whatever the individual's stated resistance to apartheid, could receive a Nobel Prize, the major European prize. As a black African, the moderate but nonetheless worthy Bishop Desmond Tutu could receive the Peace Prize in 1984 for his resistance to the recalcitrant apartheid government. Still, separation of black rights and white rights being what they are in South Africa, the awarding of a Nobel Prize to a white South African would, until this year, have been untenable for the jury—or so I am guessing. This is, of course, not to say that Gordimer's prize also belongs to the South African government or that it deserves it. It is to speculate

that, from the jury's point of view, the time is right to reward Nadine Gordimer and the political commitment her work has expressed for over four decades.

In her career, to date, Gordimer has published eight collections of short stories, ten novels, and two nonfiction works, has contributed excerpts from her fiction to two fine collections of photographs by David Goldblatt, and has given numerous interviews, now collected in one volume. This large body of work has prompted some reviewers and critics to assert that Gordimer is at her best in the short story and others to insist that the novel is her milieu. Having succumbed to this comparative thinking in the past, I now suspect my judgment—all these judgments—were based on the wrong question. Evidence of success in both genres disproves any assertion that Gordimer's talent is better suited to one fictional form than to another. She has also published less-polished pieces in both genres. Her work is not more accomplished in the one than in the other. Reflecting on her body of work, I realize instead that she repeats certain social situations in a number of works and that this repetition sometimes results in powerful work and sometimes not. The question to ask, then, is how repetition of these certain social situations has served Gordimer's fiction.

In a recent essay Irene Gorak points to a situation repeated in much of Gordimer's work. "Interpenetrating white and black bodies . . . forms the hidden center of all her books," Gorak asserts.⁶ Gorak criticizes what she calls the political quiescence of this repeated situation, dubbing it "libertine pastoral." I agree that much, though not all, of Gordimer's work describes bodies, explores the role of sex in life, and imagines the possibilities and difficulties of interracial sex. But Gorak is wrong to see this crucial repetition as a separation of private appetite from social choice. Examining the role of repetition in linking Gordimer's esthetics to her politics and ethics, I find that private life and public life, desire and choice, are also inextricably linked.

I use the term *repetition* thinking of Edward Said's essay "On Repetition" and Henry Louis Gates's use of the concept of repetition and reversal to explain signifying as it is practiced primarily by African Americans. Both critics focus on what Said describes as "Marx's method [which] is to repeat in order to produce difference." Said concludes:

Probably repetition is bound to move from *immediate* regrouping of experience to a more and more *mediated*

reshaping and redistribution of it, in which the disparity between one version and its repetition increases, since repetition cannot long escape the ironies it bears within it. For even as it takes place repetition raises the question, does repetition enhance or degrade a fact?⁷

Does Gordimer's repetition of black-white sexual relations "enhance or degrade" the fact? Is the hegemonic fear of rape by the black man that dictates the behavior of the white woman in "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?" enhanced by the cruel law and white self-interest imposed upon the young black women with white sexual partners in "Town and Country Lovers"? Is the Utopian interracial union that represents a new nonracial political state in *A Sport of Nature* enhanced by the interracial extramarital affair that finds itself at the margin rather than the center of *My Son's Story*? To both questions I answer yes, in short, and see clear value in the mediated repetition. In other stories of interracial sexual union the repetition is less successfully reshaped. Even in these stories, however, one can understand the need for and the use in repeating the problem and the question in response to the apartheid government's reiteration of unchanging racialist answers and solutions.

But why this particular repetition, this "interpenetrating of black and white bodies"? An answer lies in these repetitions' struggle to elucidate what are the political powers of intimate relations. By this I mean not only how state political powers define the limits of personal desire by such acts as a law against miscegenation; but I mean also how all private spheres, all families of whatever ethnicity, perpetrate sets of gender and racial ideologies. This Gordimer shows masterfully in a number of pieces, among them the early story "Something for the Time Being" and the recent novel *My Son's Story*. Thus when sexual partners of different races meet, Gordimer postulates, a possible interpenetration of these different privately held ideologies occurs. In its best fictional forms this interracial intimacy asserts itself as more than an allegory for a nonracial state.

Racial supremacists' fear of miscegenation—promoted as fear of black man's rape and enforced by laws, lynchings, and torture—occupies considerable space in South African and United States history (to name two). That fear, obscured by violence, derives in part from the possibility that the interpenetration of ethnically different private spheres and their ideologies would result in ideological accommodations threatening to absolute separation and one group's assumption of supremacy. Individuals' attempts to wrest personal appetite or desire from ideological determination are social choices. Interracial sexual relations are one means Gordimer used to explore the possibility of a social choice free from ideological deter-

mination. Her fiction repeatedly demonstrates, however, that such choice is rarely, if ever, achievable in any situation. Nevertheless, in repetition is "mediated reshaping," the possibility of change.

South African writers of every ethnic origin face the question, "Am I politically radical enough?" Whether or not they ask it of themselves, it is asked of them by reviewers and critics both inside the country and out. Behind the question is the model of the martyrs, those South Africans, like Steve Biko, who believe that only overcoming fear of death will free them to oppose the apartheid regime as one must. Theirs is a standard of sacrifice difficult to match or to doubt. Reviews and essays about Gordimer's work frequently raise the question of political commitment through a comparison of her to another South African writer (often John Coetzee), and often these essayists formulate the comparison by means of the dichotomy between so-called modernist esthetic experiment and so-called historically determined revolutionary commitment. The usual strategy assumes that the modernist esthetic is ahistorical and therefore incompatible with political commitment. In 1983 Rowland Smith compared the work of Gordimer and Coetzee, arguing that her writing is historically grounded and, thus, preferable. Richard Martin begins his 1986 comparison with the promising idea that both Gordimer's and Coetzee's uses of history are borderline cases in their treatment of realist and nonrealist form and content, but Martin returns in the end to the favored assumption. Paraphrasing Gordimer's review of Coetzee's 1983 novel *The Life and Times of Michael K*, Martin asserts that the novel demonstrates a revolution of history. On the other hand, Martin concludes that Gordimer's 1979 novel *Burger's Daughter* is "at home in history and in language, [and so] the text can take its place in the struggle for . . . a solution." Irene Gorak turns the tables of the dichotomy in her 1991 essay, declaring Gordimer the modernist whose "radical aesthetic tradition [is] yoked to a quiescent political one" and quoting Coetzee's review of *The Conservationist* (1974), in which he asserts that Gordimer's novel has not laid the Afrikaner pastoral to rest.⁸ Although my cursory treatment does not do justice to these arguments, it is, I believe an accurate characterization of the tendency to polarize narrative experiment and political engagement, the same tendency which influences Nobel lore. This polarization, together with the tendency also to compare Gordimer to other writers in order to measure relative political merit, elicits in me not the question "What should the relation of 'modernist' literature and political change be?" but "What *can* the relation between any literature and political change be?"

It is possible that no direct relation exists between literature and political change, regardless of how prescriptive or how paradoxical the literary form; but I reject the certainty of this idea, just as I

do the certainty that literature does produce political change. Instead it is probable that no easily determinable relation exists between literature and political change. Gordimer clarifies in part why this is true in numerous stories about the difficulty of beginning and maintaining direct political action and the dubious relationship between that action and greater justice. *A Sport of Nature* aside, the skepticism with which Gordimer depicts political change in most of her fictions prevails; it is obvious, for example, in *A Guest of Honor*, "A Soldier's Embrace," and "A City of the Dead, a City of the Living."

As a teacher of Gordimer's fiction, I have witnessed what the relation between her fiction and political change might be. All her best work undoes easy outrage and assumption about blame. It demonstrates the complicity with racist injustice of those who seem innocent, uninvolved, or even possessed of the correct sympathies. It teaches the careful student how to read politics as systems of

Already there was a film of dust lightly wavering up its shiny sides. I did not understand what the old man was saying; I hesitated to interfere. But now the whole seething group turned on my silence.⁹

Characters within a story often repeat a gesture, turning habits of living into statements of belief, and sometimes Gordimer repeats a gesture of a character from one piece in another character of another work, but repeats it with a critical difference. These modest changes are both credible and moving. One such example occurs in two works separated by decades: "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?" and *My Son's Story*. The first, the story Gordimer chose to begin her *Selected Stories*, describes a meeting in an isolated field between two strangers, a young white woman and a poor black man.

. . . any move seemed towards her and she tried to scream and the awfulness of dreams came true and nothing would come out. She wanted to throw the



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power reaching into private life, lying with lovers. Those who learn what her fiction shows from affiliative bonds, links to consciously learned ideas challenging the intimate ideologies of unexplored assumptions. Whether or not these affiliative ideas provoke action and action produces change are another matter.

The strength of Gordimer's fiction lies less in what her characters say than in her careful descriptions of how they move through different private, public, physical, and political landscapes. Her characters' essential gestures speak. They tell of the characters' cruelty and grace, vulnerability and will, desires and choices.

The old man from Rhodesia had let go of the coffin entirely, and the three others, unable to support it on their own, had laid it on the ground, in the pathway.

handbag and the parcel at him, and as she fumbled crazily for them she heard him draw a deep, hoarse breath and he grabbed out at her—ah! It came. His hand clutched her shoulder.¹⁰

The ambiguity of this isolated encounter in which the woman interprets the man's gestures through the fear she has learned becomes in this second scene a passing encounter in a crowd. Hannah, a white woman, attends memorial services for slain young men in a black township.

. . . moving over forgotten graves with the party from the combis she stumbled on a broken plastic dome of paper flowers and was quickly caught and put on her feet by a black man in torn and dirty clothes: *sorry sorry*. They were all around, those who had followed the convoy, and those who were streaming down from all parts of the township to the graveyards.¹¹

With the absence of isolation, separation, and unmediated fear in this second scene, the hand that seemed to clutch now quickly put her on her feet. This is repetition with a difference—not necessarily in the black man's hand but in the white woman's head.

While congratulating Gordimer on her achievement, it is important to concede what she herself would concede: her opportunities as an artist in South Africa between the 1940s and 1990s have, because of her "color," surpassed any available to artists of other "colors" whom political conditions have often forced into exile.¹² Ezekiel Mphahlele, one of those exiles, gracefully illustrates this point at the end of his 1959 autobiography *Down Second Avenue*. Having escaped the confines of South Africa and gone to Lagos, he sits in a garden listening to Vivaldi and remembers an afternoon in Gordimer's garden where they also listened to Vivaldi. The memory serves as a reminder that Gordimer's garden could only be a temporary oasis; in Lagos Mphahlele felt the full refreshment of Vivaldi in his own garden.¹³ Perhaps the Swedish Academy has contributed to the dismantling of the apartheid government's separate systems of opportunity by honoring Nadine Gordimer's art and its resistance to injustice.

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¹ See especially *WLT* 62:2 (Spring 1988), a special issue on the Nobel Prizes in Literature 1967–1987; *WLT* 55:2 (Spring 1981), a special issue on the Swedish Academy; and William Riggan, "The Swedish Academy and the Nobel Prize in Literature: History and Procedure," *WLT* 55:3 (Summer 1981), pp. 399–405.

² See, for example, *Black American Literature Forum*, 22 (Fall 1988), which contains several pieces concerning Soyinka's

award, including Soyinka's acceptance speech (pp. 447–48) and an essay by Bernth Lindfors (pp. 475–88); *The Economist*, 309 (29 October 1988), pp. 95–96; Bruce King's comments in *Sewanee Review*, 96 (Spring 1988), pp. 339–45; and Reed Way Dasenbrock's in *WLT* 61:1 (Winter 1987), pp. 5–9.

³ John Kwan-Terry, "Chinese Literature and the Nobel Prize," *WLT* 63:3 (Summer 1989), pp. 385–90.

⁴ John Banville, "Winners" (a review of Nadine Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories*, Ian Buruma's *Playing the Game*, and Michael Ignatieff's *Asya*), *New York Review of Books*, 21 November 1991, pp. 27–29.

⁵ Black South African leaders warn those of us outside the country, through our press, that conditions in South Africa today are still tenuous.

⁶ Irene Gorak, "Libertine Pastoral: Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*," *Novel*, 24 (Spring 1991), pp. 241–56.

⁷ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Cambridge, Ma., Harvard University Press, 1983, pp. 124–25; and Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988, and *Figures in Black*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1989.

⁸ See Rowland Smith, "The Seventies and After: The Inner View in White English-Language Fiction," in *Olive Schreiner and After*, Malvern Van Wyk Smith and Dan MacLennan, eds., Cape Town, David Philip, 1983, pp. 196–204; Richard Martin, "Narrative and Ideology in Coetzee and Gordimer," *Ariel*, 17 (July 1986), pp. 3–21; and Irene Gorak's essay (note 6). Brian Macaskill's "Interrupting the Hegemonic: Textual Critique and Mythological Recuperation from the White Margins of South African Writing" (*Novel*, 23 [Winter 1990], pp. 156–81) provides a persuasive defense of *The Conservationist* predicated on a link between narrative sophistication and political acumen. Macaskill, however, also engages in comparison, in this case of *The Conservationist* and André Brink's *Rumours of Rain*.

⁹ Nadine Gordimer, "Six Feet of the Country," in her *Selected Stories*, New York, Penguin, 1978, p. 78.

¹⁰ Nadine Gordimer, "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?," in her *Selected Stories*, p. 19.

¹¹ Nadine Gordimer, *My Son's Story*, New York, Penguin, 1991, p. 109.

¹² See, for example, "Relevance and Commitment," in *The Essential Gesture*, Stephen Clingman, ed., New York, Knopf, 1988, pp. 133–43.

¹³ Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Down Second Avenue*, London, Faber & Faber, 1959, p. 220.