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Bringing European ideas back to African reality

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The ambiguity of Nadine Gordimer's position as a writer – her dual commitments: to society, and to writing itself – has had a decisive influence on the development of her creative vision. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the strategies of fictional writing used by Gordimer in expressing the basic duality that pervades all aspects of South African life and its politics.

I Introduction: Politics and the Necessity for a Private View

In *The Conservationist,* a novel written by Nadine Gordimer, the main character Mehring makes an attempt at planting a couple of European trees in the African soil. The soil surrounding the roots has to be imported all the way from Europe:

»Broken in upon, the earth gives up the strong muthy dampness of a deserted house or a violated tomb. At one layer roots frayed by the spades stick out like broken wires. He leans down to tug at one – the young trees must not have to compete for nourishment with the root system of some other growth.«(Gordimer 1974:212)

The native, African soil offers passive resistance to the advance of a *foreign element.* Gordimer uses a brilliant simile which gets to the core of the typically South African problem. The problem consists in a vain attempt at reconciliation of European ideas with African reality with which they seem to be profoundly incompatible:

»{ ... } the two small trees now stand like branches children have stuck in the sand to make a 'garden' that will wither in an hour.« (Gordimer 1974:213)

The duality that pervades all aspects of the South African way of living and its politics, has found its literary transformation in Gordimer's fiction. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the strategies of writing used by the author in order to express the concept of twoness. The levels on which Gordimer enacts this concept are many. The above-mentioned example from The Conservationist shows how she deals with the all-pervading duality on the level of stylistics. However, the same concept seems to be essential in the characterization of a typical Gordimerian hero who finds herself or himself driven out into the open field between ideas and reality, between the African present and the heritage of a European past, as much as between politics and private life. No matter how strong her or his striving to secure privacy is, the common person eventually falls victim to politics. The white hero who refuses to accept injustice has not much choice except to act violently by opting for left activism or to live as a »liberal« too often opting for the line of least resistance. The crucial moment in the development of the plot is usually the moment when the writer exposes the split in the mind of her hero to the reader, or makes the main character herself or himself become aware of the fatal duality that exists in the own mind. Gordimer shows her novelistic expertise in meticulous depicting seemingly haphazard details that interlace forming a mat of dynamic motives that, no matter how accidental their occurrence might seem, actively contribute to the plot of the novel by pushing it forward.

Painfully aware of a basic duality in the approach of the writer to the politics, Gordimer follows Jean-Paul Sartre's view in claiming that there is no fidelity without contestation. In the address given at the Durban Indian Teachers' Conference in December 1975 she makes an attempt at defining an elusive notion of what might be called a writer's freedom. Gordimer perceives the freedom of an artist as »his right to maintain and publish to the world a deep, intense, **private view** of the situation in which he finds his society. If he is to work as well as he can, he must take, and be granted, freedom from the public conformity of political interpretation, morals and tastes.« (Gordimer 1988:104) Gordimer is recoeding her own convictions, aware of the fact that there is no censorship strong enough to destroy the creative integrity of a writer for as long as he or she does not agree to censor himself or herself, to be persuaded, cajoled or frightened into betraying the ethics of art. Nadine Gordimer is an artist who draws her inspiration from the intricacies of everyday life and stubbornly goes on writing *the truth as she sees it.* Her sensibilities allow no simple definition of any issue. Dedicated to the principles of liberal humanism and opposed to any form of racial categorization, the South African Nobel Prize winner proves unrelenting when she finds it necessary to pin-point the paradox in the concept of freedom. The freedom to have a private view of life may be threatened by the writer's *awareness of what is expected* from him, the threat coming unexpectedly from the very strength of the writer's protest against repression of

political freedom. Gordimer strongly opposes any form of repression that a political regime in power may induce upon its subjects while, at the same time, she has the courage to express her abhorrence of *conformity to the orthodoxy of opposition.* On the one hand, real writers are being *censored, banned* and *gagged* (Cf. Gordimer 1989:58–67), while on the other, they run a risk of being regarded as mere mouthpieces of the people whose beliefs and ideals they share as human beings. Gordimer says that the writer's identification with those people and loyalty to ideals may set up a state of inner conflict. An overall insight into Gordimer's novelistic work as well as into her short stories and essays, a thorough analysis of her strategies of writing, but also an ordinary reader's superficial, pleasure-seeking approach to her fictional world, reveal the same, intriguing fact. We are led to believe that there would not be a unique Gordimerian type of prose writing if it was not for a basic duality that imbued all the aspects of her work once it had been initiated by the state of conflict in the author herself. She strongly believes that the tension between standing apart and being fully involved made her a writer.

The whole South-African society is based on the tension which forces an individual, no matter what skin colour may be, into choosing between two possibilities – one is to bunch up in order to share a sense of identity with like-minded persons, the other to stay aloof from the »common cause« in a vain attempt to live a »private life«. The basic duality and the state of conflict it causes in the mind of an individual provides a bridge between all South-Africans independently of their racial, national and religious identity. In that respect, the writer's position is not an exceptional one. However, what makes a difference is an artist's capacity to bring the internal conflict to the awareness and to communicate it to large audiences. Gordimer declares emphatically that she has never written a »political novel«. Indeed, the authorial consciousness which reigns over the fictional world of her novels shuns the vulgar didacticism that is so typical of *committed literature.* She is primarily interested in the way repression, prejudice and cultural clichés refract on their way through the prism of an individual human mind. Even when she chooses to deal with political issues explicitly as in *A Guest of Honour* or in the famous example of *Burger's Daughter* (the book to which the South-African system of censorship violently reacted by banning it in 1975), the outcome is a powerful *intimate* story, or a Forsterian type of fiction, the best example of this being her early novel *A World of Strangers.* When I say *Forsterian* I primarily refer to E. M. Forster's techniques of depicting the clash between East and West in *A Passage to India.* The English novelist, who had been criticized at first for anti-British bias, strongly influenced Nadine Gordimer's strategies of depicting the development in human relations in a society whose pattern seems to the narrator of Gordimer's *World of Strangers* – »as intricate and ambiguous in its composition as the Oriental rug«. (Gordimer 1962:85)

In an essay written in the seventies, Nadine Gordimer gives explicit attention to the ways and meanings of her own fiction. She notes: »I am acting upon my society, and in the manner of my apprehension, all the time history is acting upon me.« (Gordimer 1989:115) Gordimer herself is a private liver in a desperate attempt to express and communicate to the world a deep, intense, private view of the situation in which she finds her country. The flesh of real life produced by the surface of two societies in friction gives artistic credibility to Gordimer's fiction. As a writer, she is less learned than passionate. Gordimer's fiction occurs, in the imaginative sense. For her to write is to express »the life-giving drop – sweat, tear, semen, saliva – that will spread an intensity on the page; burn a hole in it«. (Gordimer 1989:117) She would endorse Forster's celebrated comment: »Yes – oh dear yes – the novel tells a story«.

II Where do Strangers Fit in?

A World of Strangers is a brilliant character study. The author describes the reflection of the South-African social pattern as it appears on the core of the brains of individual persons, characters whose mental structure has been developed in a highly politicized, race-conscious, multi-religeous and multi-cultural setting. The main character, a young Englishman Toby Hood, comes to live in Johannesburg as a representative of his family's publishing company. However, he is painfully aware that the liberal views of his parents oblige him to represent the family in a another way as well. He finds himself profoundly incapable of making a stand for liberal principles although he shares them with his parents. Toby belongs to those people who simply want to live a private life and before going to South-Africa he says to himself:

»I had no intention of becoming what they saw me as, what they, in their own particular brand of salaciousness, envied me the opportunity to become – voyeur of the world's ills and social perversions. I felt, as I had so often before, a hostility, irritation, and resentment that made me want to shout, ridiculously: I want to live! I want to see people who interest me and amuse me, black, white, or any colour. I want to make care of my own relationship with men and women who come into my life, and let the abstractions of race and politics go hang. I want to live! And to hell with you all.« (Gordimer 1962:36)

Indeed, Toby comes to Johannesburg and begins to move between two worlds, structured in a different way and opposed one to another. His girl-friend Cecil belongs to the complacent wealthy universe of white party-goers, while his best friends, Steven and Sam, belong to black townships. Slowly, Toby Hood becomes aware that he cannot provide a bridge between two separate spheres of his own life. He cannot *let the abstractions of race and politics go hang* as he could have had if he stayed in his part of Europe. The clash between Toby's European ideas and South-African reality occurs when the young Englishman finds out that race and politics

are very much alive in Johannesburg, that they govern the lives of ordinary people and show no intention of letting them loose. Without wanting it, Toby slips into the role of a voyeur of the social perversions in the South-African capital. He remarks: »I had come to feel curiously at home, a stranger among people who were strangers to each other.« (Gordimer 1962:168) The role of a mere observer, makes it possible for Toby to return eventually to Europe, the place where he belongs. However, the life of his South-African friend could only have a tragic end in the world where *the private livers have become hunted people.* Gordimer defines Steven as »a new kind of man, not a white man, but not quite a black man, either: a kind of flash – flash-in-the-pan – produced by the surface of the two societies in friction.« (Gordimer 1962:134)

Characters like Steven and Cecil, in spite of the social and racial barriers that separate them, share a common approach to life. Both of them belong to the category of the *private livers* who are always trying to contrive a means of escape from reality. They are in need of somebody who would stand between them and the South African realities of their existence. Unlike the *public livers* who must join, take a stand, be Communist or Anti-Communist, Nationalist or Kaffirboetie, who must protest and defy – men like Steven and women like Cecil are rebels against rebellion. They live in the present and they are alive in defiance of everything that would attempt to make them half-alive. They have a private revolution of their own. (Cf. Gordimer 1962:122, 123, 124) The tragedy is that South-African reality deprives them of the possibility to realize how similar their temperaments are. Toby thinks how well Steven and Cecil would have gotten on together, if they could have known each other: »Their flaring enthusiasms, their unchannelled energy, their obstinately passionate aimlessness – each would have matched, out-topped the other.« (Gordimer 1962:205) Toby is aware that he could not provide a bridge between the two of them because they belong to the separate spheres of the life of Johannesburg. Like an Orpheus, he passes from one world to another – but neither seem real to him. For in each, what sign is there that the other existed – revolves Toby in his mind together with the novelist. (Cf. Gordimer 1962:197) The appearance of a private liver is contrived in indifference to and independence of her or his background. Cecil and Steven are double strangers. The worlds they belong to are mutually exclusive:

> »It was true that a black man and a white man, though acquainted, were unlikely to run into each other by chance in Johannesburg. The routine of their lives might run parallel most of the time, but it was astonishing how effective were the arrangements for preventing a crossing.« (Gordimer 1962:115)

On the other hand, Cecil and Steven do not feel at home in the world of their own race where public livers are in the majority. However, they do not shun company. They enjoy every second of their existence, skimming over the surface of what, only in the moments when they have the blues, they surmise as the possibility of *the real life.* Toby analyzes his girl-friend's way of thinking and behaving:

»She lived in today, this minute, and if the past or the future caught at her, struggled helplessly in moods that, watching her, you could give a name to, but that she herself did not relate to the circumstances of her life. She had the blues: so she shifted her feelings from the particular to the general.« (Gordimer 1962:151)

Cecil's and Steven's attitudes towards life are quite similar. Their easy-going habit of mind makes them popular in the circles in which they mingle. Even their complacency has an appeal in itself. Cecil has a »strong instinct for the conventionally unconventional mores of the wealthy "smart" set.« (Gordimer 1962:164) Steven is an outgoing person as well. Toby ponders over the reasons that made him a 'loved' person. He comes to the conclusion that what Steven's acquaintances glory in him is his white man's ways produced unselfconsciously in their company:

»I looked at Steven, dancing proudly as a strutting cock before a little rounded-eyed, painted black girl, calling out remarks that kept admiring eyes turned on him, and thought of him playing darts in an East End pub. Why should he want that gray, fog-sodden world and its dreary pastimes scaled down to dwindling energies? Yet he did. He was drawn to the abundant life that blazed so carelessly in the room about me. When black men lose that abundance, sink it, as they long to, in the vast variation of our world, both the hate and the fascination will be gone, and we will be as indifferent to them as we are to each other.« (Gordimer 1962:129)

This is a rather bleak perspective of South Africa's future. By the end of the fifties, Nadine Gordimer lost much of her optimism. It was due to the government's renewed attacks on any form of inter-racial mixing. The rise of African nationalism on the other hand contributed to her disillusionment. Gordimer's answer to the question »Where do whites fit in in the new Africa of the future?« is simple: »Nowhere.« In an essay published in *Twentieth Century* in April 1959 she writes:

»The white man who wants to fit in in the new Africa must learn a number of hard things. He'd do well to regard himself as an immigrant to a new country; somewhere he has never lived before, but to whose life he has committed himself. He'll have to forget the old impulses to leadership, and the temptation to give advice backed by the experience and culture of Western civilization – Africa is going through a stage where it passionately prefers its own mistakes to successes (or mistakes) that are not its own.« (Gordimer 1989:34, 35)

Evident here is Gordimer's sense of emotional rebuff. Africans long to be off on their own and the fact that some of the white intellectuals welcome the new Africa as fervently as they do seems an *intrusion* in itself. Gordimer gives a definition of the hate-engendered hate. It is »a nationalism of the heart that has been brought about by suffering.« (Cf. Gordimer 1989:32) The stage when Africans would *prefer their own mistakes* to sound advice backed by the experience of the Western civilization comes after the first fascination with the different and the new, both stages being indispensable to the growth of their national consciousness as well as to the political, sociological and spiritual growth of Africa in general. In *A World of Strangers* there is a scene illustrative of the »first« sheepishly passive stage in the »evolution«:

»Looking always as if they'd just sheepishly awakened from a sleep with their clothes on, they sought something: was it the gum they pushed ceaselessly from one side of their mouths to the other, like the American's do? Would the latest slang, in English, do it? Or the sports shirt with the pink and black collar? They did not know; they had not found out yet. But Steven had; they could see it, there he was. He had not gone under beneath his correspondence college B. A. the way black men did, becoming crushed and solemn with education, and the fit and cut of that aspect of the white man's Johannesburg that dazzled them most hung on him as comfortably as his well-tailored jacket.

Freckles, aimless, like creatures flopping in the sand in evolution from water to land, they saw his slippery-footed ease between the black man's element and the white. He was something new, and they worshipped the new, which lack of possessions made them believe must always be the better.« (Gordimer 1962:133,134)

South African realities of the 1950s undermined Gordimer's optimism and she suddenly became aware that the gap between the black man's element and the white could not be bridged over the way she believed. Belonging to a society implies two factors. The desire to belong is not enough. It should be matched with acceptance. Fluctuation between two forces outside reason: the fascination, on the one part, and the hate, on the other part, postpones the acceptance of the white element into the future. However, the future Gordimer foresees is worse than the present. She predicts »the vast vitiation of our world,« the time when even the hate and the fascination will be gone, the time when the world of strangers would lose the last two passions and turn into the world of all-pervading indifference.

III Music as a Catalyst between Two Worlds in Friction

Structurally, *A World of Strangers* is a refined character study rich in psychological detail. Yet, Gordimer's interest focuses primarily on those traits in her characters that make them representative of certain aspects of South-African life. The composition of the fictional world Gordimer creates is an emulation of the structure of South-African society. She weaves a mat as intricate and ambiguous in its composition as an oriental rug. The warp of the element in one colour and the weft of the element in another colour interlace without mixing:

»It's so easy to be ridiculous when you're trying to identify yourself with the other person«

»Of course,' she said, smiling reminiscently. 'But it's a risk you have to take, sometimes.«

»Oh, there are ways and ways. Thing is, not to presume too much on your own understanding; never meet the other one more than half-way.« (Gordimer 1962:75)

As always in her fiction, Gordimer shows a 'history from the inside' (Clingman 1986). She reconstructs a world the way one solves a jigsaw puzzle, fitting tiny pieces together. Different colours represent different identities. However, the lack of a

common human identity turns South African society into a world of strangers who never meet one another more than half-way. Anna Louw, the only »public liver« Toby associates with, speaks about the loneliness of a powerful minority. For a short while Anna acts as a mouth-piece of the novelist:

»It is from the daily life of South Africa that there have come the conditions of profound alienation which prevail among South African artists. The sum of various states of alienation is the nature of art in South Africa at present. [...]The white artist belongs to the white culture that rejected black culture, and is now itself rejected by black culture.« (Gordimer 1989:135)

What makes Nadine Gordimer's novelistic approach to the realities of South Africa unique, is her passion for the role of an »observer« who constantly changes perspectives and never takes it upon herself to speak for a group of people, no matter whether they are black or white. Instead of using the false pronoun »we«, Gordimer »quotes« attitudes and opinions expressed by whites themselves and by blacks themselves (Cf. Gordimer 1989:143). Before going into an analysis of South African society and its polarization, Gordimer tries to understand the split in her own mind between *standing apart and being fully involved.* She tries to break out of the double alienation of a white South African artist who runs a risk of being rejected by black culture but nevertheless has to discard a white-based value-system and to become committed to an indigenous culture. The same ethics underlines Nadine Gordimer's fiction and non-fiction – she speaks out but for herself. She has a private 'revolution' of her own. The nature of her »protest« is a purely artistic one:

»The revolutionary sense, in artistic terms, is the sense of totality, the conception of a 'whole' world, where theory and action meet in the imagination.« (Gordimer 1989:142)

This is a quotation from Gordimer's paper delivered at a conference on »The State of Art in South Africa« in 1979. Here she explores the gap of existential and psychological distance which lies between white and black writers. In the second part of *A World of Strangers,* she deals with an aspect of the same problem – this time with a false, affected »collaboration« between a black academic musician and a white amateur composer. Gordimer speaks »from behind« the main character Toby who feels disgusted at the new fashion of »discovering« African artists. He notices how some whites, having failed to secure attention in other ways, identify themselves with Africans in order to feel the limelight on their faces for the first time.

'They »discovered« African painting, theatre groups, dancers and crafts; they collaborated with Africans in all sorts of arty ventures in which their own shaky talents were disguised by the novelty, the importance of the fact that their material was genuine African. It began to be fashionable (in a very small, *avant-guard* way, I may say; on a par, perhaps, with the personal exploration of the effects of mescaline, in other countries) to have at least one African friend. A pet-African, whose

name you could drop casually: »Tom Kwaza was telling me at our house the other day ...« (Gordimer 1962:169)

The black musician Sam is being »taken up« by an amateur composer. The result of their »collaboration« is a one-act »African« opera. It is given in the dreary hall of a Bantu social centre where a new kind of fashionable audience has come to see it. The opera is more of a white man's idea of what a black man would write, and a black man's idea of what a white man would expect him to write, than the fusion of a black man's and a white man's worlds of imagination:

»It missed being Sam's work, and it missed being the other man's too – for what that might have been worth. There were one or two good moments in it – especially in the music – but its general impression was that of one of those old-fashioned gipsy operettas that, so feebly wild and gay, never come alive, and it seemed to me to have about as much Africa in it as Ruritania ever resembled any Balkan country that's ever been on a map. Of course, there was mixed audience of black and white men and women, and that, in Johannesburg, gave us all a strange, embarrassed pleasure; you couldn't help noticing it.« (Gordimer 1962:212)

In Gordimer's fiction there are scenes in which music serves as a catalyst that speeds up a »chemical reaction« between the black element and the white. It is worth while analysing the most representative ones. In *Occasion for Loving,* the central character Jessy goes to see traditional tribal dancing. It has a distressing effect on her. She is undergoing an emotional crisis and her broken 'self' corresponds with the *broken ethos* of dancers who look as if they have forgotten the purpose of the music to which they dance:

»And it was all fun. It all meant nothing. There was no death in it; *no joy.* No war, and no harvest. The excitement rose, like a breath drawn in, between dancers and watchers, and it had no meaning. The watchers had never danced, the dancers had forgotten why they danced. They mummed an ugly splendid savagery, a broken ethos, well lost; *unspeakable sadness came to Jessy and her body trembled with pain.* They sung and danced and trampled the past under their feet. Gone, and one must not wish it back. But gone ... The crazed Lear of old Africa rushed to and fro on the tarred arena, and the people clapped.« (Gordimer 1963:37; italics mine)

Already in *A World of Strangers,* Gordimer connected the noun »joy« with the effect that the »black« type of music has on people, no matter whether they perform it or dance to it. There is a party going on in the apartment of Steven Sitole. Toby's is the only white face among shining black faces. He enjoys the role of an observer who goes with Steven into the townships, the shebeens, the rooms and houses of his friends, *like Alice plunging after the White Rabbit* into another world. The novelist uses Steven's apartment as a test-tub in which a »chemical« reaction between the white element and the black would take place. As in the first example, music serves as a strong catalyst. This time, however, dancers »dance for joy«. Music in that room is not a frenzy, but rather a »fulfillment, a passion of jazz«. Steven realizes that the joy of the black people in the room is something wonderful and formidable, a 'weapon' he does not have. He feels attraction to this capacity for joy as one might

look upon someone performing a physical skill which one has lost, or perhaps never had, and he understands, for the first time, »the fear, the sense of loss there can be under a white skin«. (Cf. Gordimer 1962:129) Toby makes a comparison between jazz-crazy youths in England and the laughing and shouting crowd at Steven's party:

»I had seen jazz-crazy youths and girls at home in England, in a frenzy of dance-hall jive. I had seen them writhing, *the identity drained out of their vacant faces,* like chopped-off bits of some obscene animal that, *dismembered,* continued to jig on out of nervous impulse. But the jazz in this room was not a frenzy. It was a *fulfillment,* a passion of jazz. Here they danced for joy. They danced *out of wholeness,* as children roll screaming down a grass bank.« (Gordimer 1962:128; italics mine)

By analysing different responses to jazz music Gordimer explores existential and psychological distance which lies between the white and the black. The difference is striking. When English jazz fans dance in a club they make a group of individuals, each of them dancing alone until the music numbs their senses. The blacks from Steven's party, on the other hand, form a homogenous group of people who communicate joy to each other. For them, the music is not an escape, but an assertion:

»Music grew in the room like a new form of life unfolding, like the atmosphere changing in a rising wind. Musical instruments appeared from underfoot; people who had been talking took to another tongue through the object they plucked or blew. Feet moved, heads swayed; there was no audience, no performers – everyone breathed music as they breathed air. Sam was clinched with the piano in some joyous struggle both new.«' (Gordimer 1962:127)

In a book of essays titled *Playing in the Dark; Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* American novelist Toni Morrison thinks about how free she can be as an African-American women writer in her 'genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world'. Wrestling with the full implications of her situation leads her to consider what happens when other writers work in a historically racialized society transforming aspects of their social grounding into aspects of language. In 1983, Mary Cardinal's »autobiographical novel« *The Words to Say It* ignited Morrison's curiosity about the literary uses of »Africanist presence«, about the sources of 'black images' and the effect they have on the literary imagination and the products of that imagination in America. She was fascinated with the project in which Cardinal tried to document her madness, especially with the account of Cardinal's 'first encounter with the Thing' that provoked her mental illness. Her first anxiety attack occurred during a Louis Armstrong concert when she was about twenty:

»Armstrong was going to improvise with his trumpet to build a whole composition in which each note would be important and would contain within itself *the essence of the whole.* I was not disappointed: the atmosphere warmed up very fast. The scaffolding and flying buttresses of the jazz instruments supported Armstrong's trumpet, creating spaces which were adequate enough for it to climb higher, establish itself, and take off again. The sounds of the trumpet sometimes piled up together, fusing a new musical base, a sort of matrix which gave birth to one precise, unique note, tracing a sound whose path *was almost painful,* so absolutely necessary had its equilibrium and duration become; *it tore at the nerves* of those who followed it.« (quoted after Morrison 1992:vi,vii; italics mine)

Cardinal's description of Armstrong's improvisation has much in common with the description of the music played at Steven's party in Gordimer's *World of Strangers.* In both examples, white listeners notice curious 'wholeness' connected with the music played by blacks. In a quoted passage from Gordimer's fiction, people »dance out of wholeness«. In Cardinal's self-reflexive narrative every note Armstrong plays contains within itself 'the essence of the whole'. The music in both cases causes an ambiguous feeling. Cardinal first says that she was 'not disappointed', then she admits that there was something »almost painful« about that music. She would, eventually, conclude with the statement that »it tore at the nerves of those who followed it«. Gordimer, having Toby as her mouthpiece, gets to the core of that ambiguity:

»I suppose it was a point of no return for me, as it is for so many others: from there, you either hate what you have not got, or are fascinated by it. For myself, I was drawn to the light of a fire at which I had never been warmed, a feast I had not been invited to.« (Gordimer 1962:129)

At Armstrong's concert, Cardinal came to the point of no return. There was something in the music that made her run into the street as if she was »possessed«. Her heart accelerated *shaking the bars of her rib cage, compressing her lungs so the air could no longer enter them.* She was gripped by panic at the idea of dying in the howling crowd. The incident was crucial in Cardinal's psychotherapy. However, what intrigues Toni Morrison is the imagery that worked as a catalyst for Cardinal's anxiety attack:

»What solicited my attention was whether the cultural associations of jazz were as important to Cardinal's "possession" as were its intellectual foundations. I was interested, as I had been for a long time, in the way black people ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them.« (Morrison 1992:viii)

Marie Cardinal's reaction to the art of a black musician was violently physical. If we compare the symptoms that marked the beginning of Cardinal's neurosis to the »symptoms« experienced by Gordimer's heroine Jessie while she was listening to ethnomusic, we would notice the striking similarity between the two. Jessie's body *trembled with pain* and for Cardinal the sound of Armstrong's trumpet was almost painful. Cardinal's heart *began to accelerate shaking the bars of her rib cage, compressing her lungs so the air could no longer enter them* and she though that she would die there *in the middle of stomping feet.* The feet of black dancers echoed through Jessie's ribs and *she felt the hollow beat inside her.* (Cf. Gordimer 1963:37) In both cases »black« music served as a catalyst that merely speeded up the psychological process that had already been in progress in the mind of a white person. Cardinal was not *disappointed* with the music performed that night. Yet, she perceived the sounds of »'black« music as a manifestation of something frighteningly strange to her – »a Thing« that she, nevertheless, carried inside her »the way a child carries the blood of his parents in his veins«. (quoted after Morrison 1992:ix) The Thing tore her apart from inside. From Cardinal's narrative we

learn that the source of her conflicting pain was in the fact that she was a French girl born in Algeria. The news about the war in the country where she was born set up a state of conflict within Cardinal who suffered from the repeated images of a white slaughter of a black mother. Those images could well be explained as an obvious illustration of the dichotomy that existed in Cardinal herself. The disappointment of Gordimer's heroine Jessie, on the other hand, comes as the result of her listening to ethno-music that has lost direct link with its historical roots. Black dancers *trample the past under their feet,* and Jessie who, in spite of her liberal views belongs to the world of white colonialists, discovers a link between the broken ethos of African dancers and her own struggle to construct an identity. According to Michael Wade's explanation, the central character of Gordimer's *Occasion for Loving,* Jessie Stilwell, personifies an aspect of the liberal dilemma in South Africa:

»The suggestion is that the source of Jessie's neurotic unhappiness, her sense of living outside the process of time, is very closely linked to certain aspects of the African experience in South Africa.« (Wade 1978:81)

III Living in the Interregnum

The principal reason Toni Morrison got interested in Cardinal's case was that she, being a black writer, did not have the same access to traditionally useful constructs of blackness. However, the use of »black images« in literature and the effect they have on the literary imagination of white authors, intrigued Morrison. It made her sensitive to the hidden signs of racial information in her own language:

»Neither blackness nor "people of color" stimulates in me notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread. I cannot rely on those metaphorical shortcuts because I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive "othering" of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work. My vulnerability would lie in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; in vilifying whiteness rather than reifying it. The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains.« (Morrison 1992:x,xi)

Morrison admits that her potential vulnerability lies in *romanticizing blackness.* Gordimer comes to a similar conclusion in her paper at the conference on »The State of Art in South Africa«. She emphasizes that a purely white-based culture is as meaningless for whites as for blacks, in the future of South Africa. However, she warns her black colleagues that they should accept »the tools of white culture – most importantly, written literature with all its forms, from blank verse to secular drama

and the novel« and recognize it as something distinct from the inherent threat of all-white culture, otherwise, »their art will be *nostalgic,* there will be an hiatus between modern life and art for them. They will be in danger of passing into a new phase of alienation«. (Cf. Gordimer 1989:141,142; italics mine)

Nadine Gordimer's passion for self-inspection has no equal in contemporary literature. »I have to offer you myself as my most closely observed specimen.« – declares Gordimer in an important essay titled »Living in the Interregnum«. Saying that, she remains a writer, not a public speaker. (Gordimer 1989:264) Gordimer feels that there is an essential disruption in the very state of being she tries to convey in her fictional and essayistic works. She has found the source of that »disruption« in the interregnum between two social orders but also between two identities which are in constant friction in the consciousness of a white liberal. One identity is known and discarded, the other known and undetermined. In 1982 Gordimer is even more unsure of her future position in the new Africa than she was in 1959 when she posed the question: »Where do whites fit in?«. She believes that the white writer in South Africa should try to find a way to reconcile *the irreconcilable* within himself. She is determined to find her place »in history« while still referring as a writer to the values that are beyond history. In a conference on »Culture and Resistance« Nadine Gordimer had to answer perhaps the most painful question ever posed to her: »Does she think white writers should write about blacks?« Behind that question from the floor that disguised both a personal attack on Gordimer's work and »an edict publicly served upon white writers by the same orthodoxy that prescribes for blacks« – there was a belief that the white writer does not share the total living conditions of blacks and therefore must not write about them. Gordimer explains her artistic position:

> »In the ensuing tense exchange I reply that there are whole areas of human experience, in work situations – on farms, in factories, in the city, for example – where black and white have been observing one another and interacting for nearly 350 years. I challenge my challenger to deny that there are things we know about each other that are never spoken, but are there to be written – and *received with amazement and consternation, on both sides,* of having been found out. Within those areas of experience, limited but intensely revealing, there is every reason why white should create black and black white characters.« (Gordimer 1989:279; italics mine)

The clash between European ideas and African reality has become the favourite theme of Gordimer's fiction and the most usual problem with which her characters are confronted. She is deeply aware of the writer's dual commitments: to society, and to writing itself. Once she wrote that apartheid is above all »a habit« that makes unnatural seem natural (Cf. Gordimer 1989:266). The unique quality of Gordimer's novelistic approach is in breaking her readers' habits by showing them a new aspect of their everyday life and thus, making them realize the danger of taking for granted what seems most natural in a genderized, sexualized and wholly racialized world. Gordimer follows Brecht in his belief that a writer's work is his

essential gesture as a social being. However, there is a difficult question to which she does not know the answer: »Can the artist go through the torrent with his precious bit of talent tied in a bundle on his head?« (Gordimer 1989:278). Fortunately, even in the moments when Gordimer remains silent, her fiction speaks.

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Dvoznačnost položaja u kojem se našla Nadine Gordimer kao književnica, dvostruki osjećaj obaveze – prema svijetu i prema pisanju samome – imao je presudni utjecaj na razvoj njezine stvaralačke vizije. Cilj je ovog priloga ilustrirati strategije proznoga pisanja kojima se Gordimerova služi kako bi izrazila temeljno dvojstvo koje prožima sve aspekte južnoafričkog života i politike.