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REVISING SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY: MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES IN THE NOVELS OF NADINE GORDIMER

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I. HISTORY AND FICTION

A reexamination of the relations between literature and history is a characteristic of this postmodern era. History is thus considered, not only as the recording of events of the past, but as the telling of a story about the events of the past. The innovation lies not in the subject matter, but in a more daring crossing of the traditional boundaries between what had always been called "literature" and what had always been accepted as "history." The mixing is not new; the historical novel, as well as the epic, have long existed as literary genres. The problem, as Linda Hutcheon explains, seems to reside in the manner, in "the self-consciousness of the fictionality, the lack of the familiar pretence of transparency, and the calling into question of the factual grounding of history-writing" (Hutcheon 1989: 35).

Similarly, post-structuralist thought makes it clear that history is always "narrated," implying that the past is not available in pure form, but always as

"representations." History is thus understood to be the re-creation of past events, through a combination of memory and imagination, intuition and narrative discourse, signalling close parallels between it and what is considered "fiction." In this regard, the manner in which the discourse is presented, and, in particular, the perspective chosen to articulate it, are essential features for the understanding of history. In contrast, Stephen Clingman has observed how "history as it has been lived and experienced by people" is best shown in literature, "a perfect medium for exploring those questions, for it is in fiction that individual and social narratives are given visible and public voice" (1986: ix). This issue is of particular importance for post-colonial literature, an area of research that receives its name not only from a historical period of time, but also from a very specific historical event, such as colonization. South African literature, though its experience of colonization has unique peculiarities, can be considered within the group of post-colonial fiction. The notorious policies of apartheid, which can be viewed as a kind of colonization over a large sector of black South Africans, has bred a vision of history that is singular to that country, and which has been continually interpreted by fiction. A. E. Voss, in an article dealing with current South African writing, points to a new post-apartheid era in which "for knowledge and understanding of the past we will rely on writing of the future" (1992: 2). South Africa's main feature is an immense variety of human backgrounds and situations: an extraordinarily large number of ethnically separate groups, a great divide between rich and poor, between whites and non-whites, landowners and non-landowners. And everyday peaceful coexistence will depend a great deal on a general acceptance of different perspectives and attitudes toward the same realities.

II. NADINE GORDIMER, INTERPRETER OF SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY

Nadine Gordimer, whose narratives blur the boundaries of history and fiction, has created debate on the issue of the values of the past, national culture and political situations. This writer is considered by many as an interpreter of South African reality, and many read her fiction primarily for its vivid record of life in a controversial country (Magarey 1974: 50). Clingman affirms that Gordimer gives us an extraordinarily unique insight into historical experience in the period in which she has been writing: "If we are searching for an inner pathway to guide us through South African history

over the past forty or so years, there are few better places to look for it than in her novels" (1986: 244). Jonathan White believes that a novel such as *Burger's Daughter* has exerted a considerable influence on the knowledge people have of history, claiming that novel-writing can be an alternative way of making history, as it delves into history, and, in this manner, influences the future: he affirms that history is not the opposite of fiction, but "its mirrored one" (1993: 220). Similarly, Barbara Temple shows how Gordimer's novels, if read from the perspective of the new historicism, are of great value in our understanding of South Africa, praising Gordimer's "astute and reflexive historical consciousness" (1991: 175).

Not all critics agree on this point. Katrin Wagner accuses Gordimer of providing a primarily subjective and necessarily partial vision of South Africa. She asserts that Gordimer bases the "sub-text" of her novels in an internal paradox between her open message against apartheid, her prejudices as a white writer with particular fears, and a subconscious discourse that opposes the challenge to change in South Africa. She accuses Gordimer of using stereotypes, clichés, simplifications, and idealizations that distort history, giving finally a particular ideological reading of history rather than a representation of it. Finally she concludes that Gordimer's work must not be read as a reflection of South Africa but as her own personal drama (Wagner 1990: 105).

Nonetheless, the claim that being "subjective and partial" in postmodernist fiction is not regrettable, but quite the opposite, may be sustained. The reflection of the past in a postmodern novel is not brought about as it was in the previous realist mode, but from a distorted, fragmented and partial vision of historical events, and from subjective and personal viewpoints. What critics like Katrin Wagner consider clichés or simplifications stem from a failure to appreciate the value of the novel's presentation of multiple viewpoints and different ideologies. Katrin Wagner accuses Gordimer, for example, of suggesting that Mehring's wealthy and careless way of life is "the way in which white South Africans in general live," arguing that "it distorts a far more complex reality" (Wagner 1990: 100-101). Gordimer's characterization of Mehring is particular enough so as not to imply that he represents an average white citizen of South Africa. He is one case, representing one possible type of conflict that is significant because the social injustice upon which South African society is built makes this kind of things probable. Similarly, she points out that the novel's conclusion is "politically simplistic" (Wagner 1990: 96). Mehring abandons the farm and flees overseas leaving the land to its "true" owners, the community of black farm labourers who live on it and

off it. This ending can only be considered simplistic if we ignore precisely the meaning and intention of the novel's form: the development of that amalgam of voices and perspectives displayed through the story, the growing ambiguity of the final chapters, and the fact that the problems of Mehring's farm and of land ownership in general are left unresolved when he leaves. Wagner's final point, that Gordimer's work must not be read as a reflection of South Africa but rather as a personal statement, is also easy to answer: though the dramas enacted in her novels are clearly personal ones, we may argue that the discourses are not exclusively reflections of Gordimer's personal point of view but that, in the different novels, she proposes to present different versions of the same drama of South African history. In particular, because she is white, Gordimer has been accused of not really understanding the black struggle. This article attempts to show precisely how her meticulous use of narrative perspective enables her to approach South African reality with a depth and scope that surpasses personal experience.

Clingman argues further that Gordimer's novels provide a deep understanding of the history of South Africa, not simply because of their content, but especially because of their form: "Gordimer's novels are so valuable historically because they are so accomplished and developed as fiction. Thus, form will often be the key to consciousness, and it is where the novels are aesthetically richest that they are most useful for tracing out our history" (1986: 19). Gordimer's achievement lies more in the perspective she provides than in the literal truth of the situations she presents. In particular, her recreation of South African history and identity can be discovered in the narrative frame through which she presents the various stories. Mieke Bal has stressed that "whenever events are presented, they are always presented from within a certain 'vision'. A point of view is chosen, a certain way of seeing things, a certain angle, whether 'real' historical facts are concerned or fictitious events" (Bal 1985: 100). Gordimer displays in her novels a wide range of different voices recounting how people experienced South African history, diverse perspectives that provide a deeper understanding of the second half of the twentieth century, up to the abolition of apartheid, and show the intersection of private lives and the public history of South Africa.

The point of view is, in the case of Gordimer's narrative, precisely the place in which history and fiction meet; the perspective from which each story is told marks the distance between South African history and culture and the "truth" Gordimer wants to convey. Her novels thus pose in acute form the question of whose story will be told, and who will tell it. Bruce King, in an analysis of the evolution of Gordimer's novels, asserts that we can

see how "the novel form evolved to become increasingly 'postmodern' and multivoiced" (1993: 3). This multiplicity of voices and the corresponding shifts in perspective, evident in each of the novels, provide ways to explore the close connection between the personal and the political. Aware of the possibilities of viewpoint manipulation, the writer often displays alternating points of view that show from very different perspectives how people were influenced and determined by the politics of South Africa. The flexibility in her manipulation of point of view is observed, in particular, in the four novels that will be studied here in detail: *A Guest of Honour* (1971), *The Conservationist* (1974), *Burger's Daughter* (1979), and *My Son's Story* (1991).

III. *A GUEST OF HONOUR*: ALTERNATIVE FOCALISATION

A Guest of Honour, though a third-person narration, is channelled through different focalizers. For the most part, it is Bray, a retired British colonel and a former colonial officer who returns for the independence celebrations in the African country from which he had been expelled ten years earlier for co-operating with the independence movement. His stay is extended, partly because he becomes involved in writing a governmental report on education, and partly because he is having an affair with Rebecca, a young woman who has been living in Africa for years now, studiously ignoring politics. As the narrative aligns itself with Bray's perspective, the political theme predominates. The novel, seen through the eyes of an Englishman, implies that a post-colonial situation, ostensibly an improvement over the previous colonialism, is not the solution to every problem, and that native people can be as good or as evil as any foreigner. *A Guest of Honour* ultimately reveals what Neocolonialism means to Africa. It is shown as a social, political and economic pattern that comes into being after independence and ironically keeps Africa dependent. It is only a façade that conceals the reality of continued exploitation (Clingman 1986: 116). Only the people who rule the country seem to change, and this will inevitably bring tragedy.

At the beginning, Bray thinks that he will meet Mweta and Shinza, two African friends, again. The three of them had fought together for independence and now he expects them to be governing together. But he finds that Mweta is now in power and that Shinza has disappeared to form a guerrilla group that will eventually bring the country to civil war. Bray's

focalisation provides the story with a rather naïve interpretation of events, because, as a liberal white, he believes, at least at the beginning of the story, in future post-colonial prosperity (*GH* 126). In spite of Bray's focalization, the omniscient narrator chooses to portray many ironically symbolic images as significant hints to the reader that that initial enthusiasm will soon fade away. For example, after the independence day celebrations, we are given a description of how "the coloured bulbs that spelled out INDEPENDENCE HURRAH had been fused by the rain, and were not working" (*GH* 43). The novel shows Bray's learning process, from idealism to finally committing himself to a specific cause, that of Shinza, and he will also learn that violence is unavoidable in Shinza's cause: "He had no others [means] to offer with any hope of achieving the end, and as he had accepted the necessity of the end, he had no choice" (*GH* 465).

In spite of the fact that the country portrayed in the novel is imaginary, *A Guest of Honour* is an important aid to understanding the vision of post-colonial transitions as seen by liberal whites who tried to help in the process (later novels will also develop this theme of how the role of liberal whites in Africa is difficult, if not futile[1]). Nonetheless, this fictitious independence process bears some resemblance to that of Zambia in the late sixties. Jan Kees Van Donge explains the parallelisms; he argues that the main characters have strong similarities to real political leaders in Zambia, and that the political and economic situation described in the novel is similar to that of Zambia in the 60s (Van Donge 1982: 80-90). However, he concludes that the novel "fails to construct a believable reality" (1982: 81). This historical background provides Gordimer with the opportunity to explore the wider topic of post-colonialism and African independence, but this does not mean that she should adhere to any rule of realistic credibility:

> Gordimer is concerned not simply to repeat a real story in and for itself; rather she uses the original example to investigate at a level of typicality the changed social and historical realities of the moment from which it emanates. (Clingman 1986: 77)

Van Donge acknowledges that there are many remarks and incidents in the book which help to reveal the nature of African politics. Gordimer does change many of the facts known about Zambia's independence, and, as Van Donge suggests "this is Zambia seen through South African eyes, Zambia 'colonized' in the imagination as a setting for the South African problem" (1982: 81). In this sense, *A Guest of Honour* could be considered a "post-

apartheid" novel, showing how history does not stop with "independence": problems and commitments will continue.

When Bray is killed towards the end of the novel, the story shifts to Rebecca's focalisation. By aligning her narrative with Rebecca's steadily inward-looking and unapologetically apolitical point of view, Gordimer emphasizes the significance of the relationship between Rebecca and Bray in the earlier part of the novel and calls attention to the way in which Rebecca's presence has not only influenced the course of Bray's experience but has also shaped Bray's perception of his own political commitment (Donaghy 1988: 21). This shift in focalisation not only distances readers from the moment of Bray's murder involving them as it does in the young woman's attempt to explain his death and life: it also redirects the narrative focus inwards, toward the private and the personal terrain, far removed from political debate. Rebecca is a foil to Bray: she cannot appreciate the historical ironies surrounding Bray, but the very limitations of her outlook enable readers to evaluate Bray's personal experience beyond the criterion of the efficacy of his political action. She realizes at the end of the novel how much she has learned with Bray: "He had made his life in accordance with some conscious choice—beliefs she supposed. . . . She had never lived with anyone like that before" (*GH* 519). In the integration of Bray's perspective with Rebecca's, this novel allows for the possibility of meaningful personal engagement even as it depicts the failure of a revolution (Donaghy 1988: 32). The novel follows Rebecca's isolation through Mozambique, Zurich and London, and at the end there is another shift in focalizer. The omniscient narrator chooses to show final events through a newspaper report:

> The two airlifts of troops who were flown in at Mweta's request for help from Britain succeeded in bringing order to the country for the time being. It was the same order of things that had led to disorder in the first place, but Mweta was back in his big house and Shinza was in exile. (*GH* 525).

This final detached perspective brings out the ambiguity and difficulty involved in considering post-colonialism in Africa, and the various perspectives show the inclusive nature of the novel's approach to the common problem in all African countries: independence and the formation of a new country.

IV. *THE CONSERVATIONIST*: FRAGMENTED VOICES FROM THE LAND

The Conservationist is considered to be Gordimer's foray into postmodernist fiction (King 1993: 4). The foreshadowing of the many voices, the confusion of facts with fantasies, its intertextuality, the unreliable or dislocated multiple narration mark this novel off from the previous ones. This formal presentation acquires significance in the story of a white industrialist, Mehring, who represents white dominion over a land inhabited by blacks, a land that becomes the subject of the novel. In South Africa, after the Native Land Act of 1913, Africans were prevented from acquiring land outside their reserves, so the situation the novel presents must be read against this historical background of injustice. Mehring also embodies to a certain extent a major reality of this time, namely the sense that the cohesion of South Africa was beginning to crumble: the massive 1971 strike against the system of contract labour in Namibia (explicitly mentioned in *The Conservationist*); the Natal strikes in 1973-74; the Black Consciousness movement that was beginning to take a strong hold amongst a black student intelligentsia, which led to the Soweto Students Revolt in 1976, etc. The independence of Mozambique in 1974 also had a tremendous symbolic significance for South Africa.

It is important to remember that Mehring is no great racist; he represents a capitalist sector in South Africa, for which apartheid has been little more than an embarrassment. He acknowledges injustice: "What percentage of the world is starving? How long can we go on getting away Scot free? . . . Soon, in this generation or the next, it must be our turn to starve and suffer" (*TC* 46-47). The main flaw seems to lie in the fact that Mehring fails to think of himself in specific historical terms, and also to acknowledge his lack of a land-owning tradition. Mehring's exploration and realization of what the land means to him is narrated mostly in the form of an inner monologue or imaginary dialogues, in which it is difficult to determine who is speaking (*TC* 79). Inside his mind, there is frequently an obsessive debate with absent characters —formulated occasionally in contracted forms, with dislocated constructions, and constant use of unfinished or verbless sentences. He addresses his former mistress (a liberal) after she has fled the country, in his thoughts (*TC* 160); he addresses his absent son, who is first in Namibia, later in New York with his former wife, whom he also addresses in this way (*TC* 220); he addresses the farm worker, Jacobus, when the latter is not there (*TC* 80). All of these are addressed without name, simply as "you." This narrative technique is most adequate to the experience of the white man in South

Africa. As we will also see in *Burger's Daughter*, the protagonist addresses imaginary people, so most of the action takes place only inside their own minds, which shows their inability to act in the real world of South Africa — though for profoundly different reasons in each novel. But the ultimate "you" for Mehring, the (literally) underlying absent character of the novel, is a black body found in his farm which will cause him a lot of problems. It "refuses" to stay buried (it comes back to the surface several times after being buried, as the result of different causes), while the police do not put much effort into finding out why the body is there, and its people insist on giving it a proper burial. It becomes a symbol for the instability of the land. "The narrative takes its impetus from the farm's landscape, more specifically from the claim to the farm made by this dead African beneath its surface" (Cooke 1985: 154). The novel actually ends with the description of the burial of this dead body:

> The one whom the farm received had no name. He had no family but their women wept a little for him. There was no child of his present but their children were there to live after him. They had put him away to rest, at last; he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them. (*TC* 267)

As the author moves in and out of Mehring's consciousness, his narrative focalisation generally predominates; his arrogant ego dissects and mocks the motives and honesty of everyone else (*TC* 69). Nonetheless, the unreliability of Mehring's vision is made manifest through the sections that appear to stem from a consciousness that is more subtle and more authorial than his and yet is directed by what has caught his attention (*TC* 149). In this manner, narrative vision extends beyond Mehring's consciousness. Moreover, the confusion of Mehring's focalisation with a more authorial one, and the confusion of imaginary and real events (especially after section 26) show the instability of a white farmer who cannot find his place in this land. His name, Mehring, although apparently Afrikaner, is actually German, so he does not even belong to that tradition of Afrikaner farmers. By denying even the self-protective comfort of a stable narrative angle of vision, Gordimer opens a re-vision of a South African history of land property to new understanding.

The constantly shifting focalisation incorporates not only the thoughts and memories of its protagonist, but also the attitudes of a wide range of characters, blacks (Jacobus and his family) (*TC* 171), whites (the three-generation Afrikaner clan from a neighbouring farm), or Indians (the four-genera-

tion Indian family running the shop). The omniscient narrator focalises through these other groups, emphasizing the fact that all of them seem to have reasons to stay on the land: they, not Mehring, are part of it. As Michael Wade observes, "natives possess precisely what he lacks: continuity, tradition, authority, a family structure, moral values" (1978: 203). Mehring bought it for diversion. Furthermore, the perspective in the novel is ostensibly enriched by the epigraphs from a nineteenth century treatise on the religious beliefs of the Zulus that bind sections of the text with a superbly resonant commentary. These intertexts from Zulu mythological texts suggest a native voice claiming property of the land[2]:

> So we came out possessed of what sufficed us, we thinking that we possessed all things, that we were wise, that there was nothing we did not know. . . . 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. (*TC* 213)

As Thorpe suggests, "the effect is to introduce suddenly a sharply contrasting glimpse of another world, of ordered customary ritual, of a relation between the human and a supernatural spirit world utterly apart from that of the novel" (1990: 118). At the end, it seems as if Zulu myth had gained control of the narrative. Nonetheless, the novel does not present a revolution of black people in South Africa claiming their rights of property. What Nadine Gordimer does in this novel is to articulate the different perspectives and narrative voices in such a way as to make that global perspective the viewpoint of history (R. Smith 1991: 178).

This multiple-voiced narration has also been criticized for providing a coldly detached and pessimistic view of South Africa on the part of the author. But a close look into the story reveals a tone of optimism that stems from a belief in historical inevitability, rather than from a present reality, because there is always a feeling that things will improve in time. The ironical facts presented (such as the dead body as the action's motivating force) and the fragmented perspective reinforce the feeling that the land will inevitably come to be owned by natives in the future, as they are an overwhelming majority. We can feel how Mehring, if not to blame personally for it, is somehow out of place and going against a growing current of common sense in this crucial issue of the ownership of the land in South Africa.

V. *BURGER'S DAUGHTER*: MULTIPLE NARRATORS AND NARRATEES

In her next novel, *Burger's Daughter*, postmodernist strategies are more evident, as the boundaries between fiction and reality are made more subtle. Many perspectives are presented, along with intertexts from real documents; these create a mixing of the real with the imaginary, the subjective with the objective, and parallels to actual events and lives that show the multicultural history of South Africa. It is a baroque formal structure "in which, despite the focus on Rosa Burger's story, other stories, perspectives, voices and historical events intrude to disrupt and impinge on the narrative" (King 1993: 7).

Burger's Daughter is set in South Africa between 1948, the year the first Nationalist government took office, and 1976, the year of the Soweto students' school boycott. This historical framework is juxtaposed with Rosa Burger's personal history —a burdensome background, as she is the daughter of a famous leader of the Communist party, Lionel Burger. Rosa tells of her childhood through her present in a quest for self-definition, at first trying to distance herself from her family's commitment, but finally coming back to it and —inevitably— to jail. The personal memories and flashbacks span the historical and political changes of those years. *Burger's Daughter* shows how public realities are interiorized, how the destiny of a nation is crucial for private lives. Some sections of the novel are intertexts from actual historical documents such as the Soweto Students Representative Council manifesto (*BD* 346-47). These are combined with other fictitious texts based on historical facts, such as surveillance reports for the Bureau of State Security (*BD* 173-77), Lionel Burger's speech at his trial for treason (*BD* 24-27), fragments of his biography (*BD* 88-94), a headmistress's school report (*BD* 12).

Lionel Burger had become a member of the Communist Party of South Africa in the late 1920s, and had remained a member of its Central Committee when the Party dissolved in the face of the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950. Captured in the mid-1960s and sentenced to imprisonment for life, he died in gaol in the early 1970s. His fictional career has therefore coincided with most of the major developments during the period of revolutionary opposition in South Africa in the twentieth century. In most of these respects the character of Lionel Burger bears a strong resemblance to the real-life figure of Abram Fischer, one of the most prominent leaders within the South African Communist Party, upon whose personal history his

career has evidently been based. "The figure of Burger acts as a bridge in the novel between fact and fiction, and past and present, as the methods of the novelist and a more orthodox historian coincide" (Clingman 1986: 172).

Clingman describes Gordimer's strategy of unattributed quotation as a "textual collage," claiming that if the original document is good enough for the story's purposes, there is no reason, for the sake of convention, to invent another one that looks exactly like it, another manifestation of that daring crossing of boundaries between fiction and history mentioned above (1986: 187). "There is a sense in which the whole fiction is designed to point out of itself, out of the whole protocol of European fiction, to a historical reality which finally engulfs it" (Ward 1989: 129-30). Rosa, for example, quotes Lenin to her father, once again pointing out of the fiction to history: "You knew it couldn't be; *a change in the objective conditions of the struggle sensed sooner than the leaders did"* (*BD* 348).

The novel basically alternates sections in third and first person narration, and this device is the main axis that supports the multivoiced narrative strategy of the whole story. This alternation is not carried out in a uniform manner, but each kind includes a whole variety of focalisations and approaches. The third-person narrator weaves a fabric of varying public and private modes of perception. The account of Rosa's interview with the Swedish biographer, for example, never aspires to go beyond publicly knowable facts: "Lionel Burger had been born in 1905 . . ." (*BD* 88). The public mode of perception has multiple voices, however. When Rosa seeks a passport from Brandt Vermeulen, the narration sounds like surveillance: "She was known to have driven to town . . . Perhaps it was a favour she wanted..." (*BD* 173). On the other hand, there are other instances in which the omniscient narrator is either openly sympathetic to Rosa, or simply neutral and dispassionate (*BD* 259, 272). What the third-person narrative attempts, in fact, is to capture and represent a social totality against the more personal first-person narration of the protagonist.

In the first-person sections, Rosa holds unspoken conversations with three absent narratees, because, as Rosa explains, "one is never talking to oneself, always one is addressed to someone" (*BD* 16). She addresses gradually someone closer to her father's life, and therefore closer to her ultimate mission in life. Through this strategy, we become aware of the importance of dialogue in the construction of personality. Rosa is trying to come to terms with her father's heritage, and she does this by addressing different people from whom she can get some kind of feedback in her quest for an identity. In the first section she addresses Conrad, a friend and lover whose view of her

she contests as a way of constructing her own. In the second section, she converses with Katya, her father's first wife, or with her friend Bernard. In the last South African episodes she finally addresses her father: a connection is resumed, as she will end up following his political steps. In this frame, "the outer world of South Africa and the inner world of Rosa's direct apprehensions of it —or Gordimer's textual representations of it— . . . have become indistinguishable" (White 1993: 223). In this novel, we can also appreciate some of that "historical inevitability" mentioned in the analysis of *The Conservationist.* From a political and historical perspective, the narrative strategy highlights precisely how the pressure that ideological and social forces exert on the individual make inevitable, in spite of individual resistance, the acceptance of that political commitment initially rejected by Rosa.

The alternation between first- and third-person narrative creates a tension that is echoed in the novel as "the tension between creation and destruction in yourself . . . wandering between your fantasies and obsessions" (*BD* 47). Tension is achieved by the absence of an omniscient narrator in the moments of inner climax, where an explanation is expected. The linear narrative is thus challenged and subverted by interruptions, digressions, contrasts, ambiguities, gaps, "contrasting materials which modify the significance of the narrative" (King 1993: 8). Rosa is the centre of the action, yet much of the action is composed not of external political events, but rather of meditations on those same events by Rosa herself and by several other characters. "When they saw me outside the prison, what did they see?" (*BD* 13). Aware of the importance of the focaliser in any story and any history, Gordimer uses in this novel a whole variety of focalizations, which prevent the reader from "simplifying" Rosa and consequently shows her from many different angles, in such a way that it is impossible to claim that any one view of Rosa triumphs, or has priority in the text. Furthermore, the novel also denounces certain simplifications that have occurred when writing history. When Rosa meets Baasie, a black boy adopted by her family, after many years, he harshly condemns her and her kind. He is against any contribution of whites to the struggle and therefore hates Rosa and her father for their efforts: "why do you think you should be different from all the other whites who've been shitting on us ever since they came?" (*BD* 322). Rosa comes to the conclusion that his violent attitude is due to "the position their history books back home had ready for us: him, bitter; me guilty" (*BD* 330). The symbolic significance of this scene is a powerful one in the context of South Africa in the mid-1970s. Here the accusations of Black Consciousness are clearly hitting home. The direct challenge that Baasie has thrown to Rosa

makes her decide to return to South Africa to renew the social commitment her father left off.

VI. *MY SON'S STORY*: THE CREATION OF A NARRATOR

Gordimer employs once more the technique of multivoiced discourse in *My Son's Story* and, in that manner, explores the intersection of a black boy's private life with his father's commitment to the political struggle. *My Son's Story* is about the ways in which political commitment slowly but ineluctably transforms the lives of four members of a black South African family. Will, the son, tells us the story of his father from two different perspectives: his adolescent voice in present tense alternates with a more mature voice that speaks in third person and in the past tense. This second voice is, in fact, Will himself, years later, when he has become a writer. These two voices echo the moral complexity and ambiguity of the father-and-son relationship that makes Will a writer.

The father, Sonny, transforms himself from a schoolteacher into a revolutionary leader and orator for the struggle against apartheid. The central storyline of the narrative focuses on the affair between Sonny and a white woman, Hannah Plowman, agent of a human rights organization who visits him in prison. The novel opens with 15-year-old Will's discovery of this affair. This is the origin of Will's obsessive discourse, the story of his father and himself, focused as a story of disillusion. In the course of the narrative, as the father perpetuates this transparent infidelity against his family and his risky disregard of political prudence, the son, in turn, deceives him by exploring through his writing the intimacy of the affair; the daughter, Baby, will secretly join a militant group and marry away from home; and the ostensibly domestic mother, Aila, will hide her participation in the guerrilla group until she is arrested. An endless chain of deception and distrust is what involvement in the political struggle in South Africa has brought to this family.

The disillusion also has a formal manifestation reflected in the narrative perspective from which the story is told. Gordimer outlines it, step by step, in the present tense account of the adolescent Will. This disillusion is balanced, but also reinforced, by an apparently omniscient narrator that gives gradual revelations of the events in Sonny's life. The narrative strategy Gordimer employs in order to enter the experience of the "other" also contains an implicit criticism of the lack of privacy in South Africa in those times. Will,

as omniscient narrator, is like the secret police in South Africa; both know of Sonny's whereabouts.

In *My Son's Story* Gordimer uses a very self-conscious style of writing. Will explores, in the apparently omniscient parts, what he imagines his father and other people feel and think, to try to reconstruct a past that he had no direct access to, to try to understand what really happened. The son presents himself as the interpreter of events: "I don't think my father knows any of these things about himself. Only I know, only I" (*MSS* 95). This shifting of the focus from which the story is told, from inside the central character to outside influences, is done, according to Bruce King, with the purpose of showing ambiguity (1993: 8). This ambiguity is the real boundary between fiction and reality, because, though there are apparently two alternating points of view being presented, there is only one voice speaking, and there are also many different focalizers in the apparently omniscient parts.

The narrative voice in *My Son's Story* is also rendered ambiguous by the pronoun of the title, which suggests that the novel is composed by the father in the voice he imagines for his son. Moreover, the book's epigraph from Shakespeare's Sonnet XIII reinforces the ambiguity.[3] In the context of the sonnet it is clear that a father's story can only be told by his son, but this narrative has its origin in the absence of the father. Only the son, who must imagine his father's life from which he is excluded, is able "to record and validate that life" (Weinhouse 1993: 70). Will, as a writer, becomes the interpreter of Sonny's life. Interestingly enough, it may be argued that the main story being told is not "my son's story" or "my father's story," but that it is "my mother's story" which silently occupies the text. Aila's interiority is never breached, her story never told. Treated as a beautiful face and a quiet enigma throughout, she turns out to be a peripherality that has all along been at the centre, to the profound shock of her son: "the secret life she was living. I've been the cover for both of them. That sticks . . ."(*MSS* 234). M. Van Wyk Smith has claimed that Aila's silence all through the novel is an allegory of the writer's enforced silence in the late 1980s in South Africa (1991: 97-98).

In the omniscient sections of the novel, Will focalizes through many different characters. Occasionally the point of view is Hannah's as she gazes at Sonny. At other times, it appears to be Sonny focalizing. Not until the end does Gordimer reveal that the only narrator of the novel is Will, a voice that judges and formulates. This narrative technique has been highly praised:

> It's a brilliant device: the novel becomes not a series of internal monologues, but the effort of the family's most articulate victim to conjecture, to comprehend, what really happened to them all. It turns a bleak ending into one that suggests how social as well as personal redemption may lie in acts of selflessness, empathy and forgiveness. Writing the novel was such an act. I think Will gives the title to his father, "My Son's Story," because the voice isn't really his anymore, but Gordimer must also mean it to imply a larger wrenched-apart family than Sonny's. (Flower 1991: 322-323)

Will reveals in the last chapter that he wrote the story in order to understand: knowledge and acceptance of his destiny comes only through writing his story. In the last chapter Will himself answers the question of whose story is being told, linking it to the sense of writing literature: "It's an old story — ours. My father's and mine. Love, love/hate are the most common and universal experiences. But no two are alike, each is a fingerprint of life. That's the miracle that makes literature and links it with creation itself in the biological sense" (*MSS* 275). The development of Will into a writer is evident in his manipulation of the events that shape the story: both those he was a witness to and those he was not: "In our story, like all stories, I've made up what I wasn't there to experience myself. . . . I've imagined . . . the frustration of my absence, the pain of knowing them too well, what others would be doing, saying and feeling in the gaps between my witness" (*MSS* 276). Will suffers his father's defection as a betrayal of family and self-respect. Yet at the same time, through the power of fiction, he is able to portray the strong attractions of Hannah and Sonny's love by leaving his own perspective behind and entering imaginatively into their state of mind and heart in writing about them. The last chapter is a full account of his transformation into a writer, and we hear Will's "authentic" voice explaining how he has learned to be a writer: "And so I've learned what he didn't teach me, that grammar is a system of mastering time; to write down 'he was', 'he is', 'he will be' is to grasp past, present and future" (*MSS* 276). Nadine Gordimer herself has pointed out, "*My Son's Story* is also about writing fiction" (Coles 1991: 19). It is a novel concerned with the mystery of becoming a writer, and the construction of a myth of authoring (Greenstein 1993: 201). Will becomes a writer by telling of his painful relationship with his father; alternating his adolescent perspective with a more mature one that tries to understand or even justify. "What he did —my father— made me a writer" (*MSS* 277). The time that has elapsed between his adolescence and his adulthood is the time

he has needed to become a writer. Will is in rebellion against his father, and yet a writer, made so by him and against him. These two voices echo the moral complexity, ambiguity and hypocrisy in their relationship: Sonny's love for Shakespeare, his involvement in politics, his disillusionment, his deceptions. Will had to try to understand what Sonny taught him. Sonny's story is Will's background for his life and art.

As a writer, Will lends his voice to the struggle, linking thus his personal drama with a wider historical context and performance: "I'm going to be the one to record, someday, . . . what it was like to live a life determined by the struggle to be free," the writer who will write the book of freedom's struggle as he has lived it in his home and his South Africa (*MSS* 276). Furthermore, "Will's narrative strategy is Gordimer's evidence that a writer can penetrate the lives of people who have experiences the writer cannot share" (Weinhouse 1993: 73). It enables Gordimer to write from the point of view of a black character. Gordimer was conscious of her limitations as a white writer, but "through Will . . . she imagines her way into a world which she can only have experienced tangentially" (Greenstein 1993: 196). Gordimer has depicted the mind of a black person from an inner perspective that makes us consider the South African problem from a personal as well as a political point of view. Moreover, Will's intimate drama of personal conflict parallels the public struggle taking place in South Africa; the tension of black South Africans between public politics, jail, violence, and committing oneself, at the cost of one's family's peace; between fighting with the prospect of certain defeat, and not fighting at all.

VII. CONCLUSION

"Is it not the function of some writing, of stories, to suggest that truth may be beyond both fact and opinion, may be rather an imaginative re-construction, a re-creation of life?" (Voss 1992: 1). Through imagination Gordimer explains many complex aspects of human lives. Her novels shed light on the specific consequences of the historical circumstances of life in South Africa. This is why the perspective from which the story is told is essential to the meaning and richness of the message of the novel. How those circumstances have affected specific individuals and families is ultimately a discussion of Gordimer's discourse with reality. A novel may conduct a reader towards a more concrete insight into reality, which transcends a merely common-sense

apprehension of things; the reader is always aware that the work is not itself reality but rather "a special form of reflecting reality." It is, therefore, Gordimer's specific representation of reality that matters.

Any future narration of the history of South Africa (Soweto Student's Revolt in 1976, the Suppression of the Communist Party, the end of apartheid politics, landownership, the imprisonment of political leaders and revolutionaries...), will be enriched by taking into account the enriching variety of perspectives and interpretations presented by fiction in the recreation of these important events. It is specifically in fiction where we can best appreciate how public events affect and determine every day life, and also how the interpretation of the same events can change depending on who is telling the story or who is "seeing" history. Furthermore, Nadine Gordimer's use of a complex narrative perspective does not turn her novels into historical novels, but into new recreations of history from the re-imagining of personal conflict and dramas. A new dimension is added to the relationship of fiction and history, and this requires a new kind of representation of the images and messages; fragmentation, ambiguity, dislocation, gaps, etc, are not aims in themselves, but new means to convey new situations, new historical sites, and, ultimately, new perspectives.a

NOTES

1. This theme can in fact be traced in every novel by Gordimer. There is usually at least one character that finds him/herself in this dilemma. In *Burger's Daughter*, Rosa's confrontation with Baasie reveals this tension. In a lesser way, in *My Son's Story*, Hannah Plowman, Sonny's white lover, is also ironized in her contribution to the black struggle. At the end she is free to move out of South Africa and get on in her career, while the black leaders are to suffer the worst consequences.

2. These were gathered from *The Religious System of the Amazulu*, compiled by Reverend Henry Callaway in 1868.

3. "You had a father; let your son say so."

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