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Review Article

Fiction and Propaganda: Conversations with the Laureate

Conversations with Nadine Gordimer. Edited by Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1990. Pp. xxiv, 321. \$29.95. Paper, \$14.95.

Nadine Gordimer has been highly visible in the 1990s. In 1991 she won the Nobel Prize; in the same year her short story collection, *Jump*, was published. In 1990 her novel, *My Son's Story*, had appeared, as had my edited volume, *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer*, and *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, edited by long-time Gordimer critic Nancy Topping Bazin and by Marilyn Dallman Seymour. This last book, a collection of all her previously published interviews, is an invaluable addition to the Gordimer canon. Not only does it assemble what had up to then been scattered across a wide range of journals and magazines, but this single volume enables us to trace the interview-pronouncements of the Nobel prize winner from 1958 to 1989, the dates of the first and last interviews published here. The editorial apparatus is minimal: an introduction by Bazin and a "Chronology" of significant events in Gordimer's life. For the rest, the interviews speak for themselves. With the exception of a few over-intrusive interviewer's comments, the result is vintage Gordimer for some 313 pages.

What a powerful effect these comments have *en masse*. They reveal both consistency and change. Like her fiction, her interviews reflect both

the immediate concerns of the period in which they were given, and—by corollary—the change in historical circumstances in South Africa over the last 35 years.

What remains constant is Gordimer's passionate defence of the value of fiction as art rather than propaganda; her practice of working from the specific (or individual) to the general in that fiction; her belief in individual (rather than group) freedom; and above all her all-embracing opposition to apartheid. Even within these constant verities, however, there are changes of emphasis and nuance brought on by the changes of time. The early comments on the colonial nature of the author's childhood and early adulthood do not recur in the middle and late interviews. By that time the body of South African and Commonwealth (Gordimer does not use the term postcolonial) writing had already grown beyond the point at which it was necessary for her to explain how the Transvaal milieu of her childhood appeared "unreal" in contrast to the physically alien and yet intellectually familiar world presented in the English books in whose imaginative aura she spent her adolescence. As an established writer she still needed to make the point in Johannesburg in the fifties, sixties, and even early seventies.

Her scepticism about feminist causes (before the liberation of all black men and women) in the South African situation becomes less dismissive in later years. The exclusive use of "he" as an indefinite term in the early and middle interviews gives way to an occasional "his or her," and by the last interview in the book, given in 1989, a perennial theme is presented in contemporarily gender-appropriate terms: "A writer must never let herself become a propagandist" (311).

As Gordimer's fictional style becomes more sophisticated, the need to explain it (and the need of interviewers to question her about it) becomes more important. In several fascinating dicta about her novels, Gordimer repeatedly returns to *The Conservationist* and *Burger's Daughter* as texts in which the narrative voices require comment. (She is obviously proud of *The Conservationist* and yet concerned that she may have suppressed too much in its presentation.) Because *A Sport of Nature* appeared in 1987, only two years before the final published interview, there is less comment on that novel than on *The Conservationist* (1974) and *Burger's Daughter* (1979), but clearly both interviewers and author saw a need for clarification on the presentation of Hillela in the 1987 text. And what Gordimer has to say about that protagonist is consistent with her growing

fascination in the 1980s with action itself and the obligation for action. In the early interviews, understanding and awareness—the ability to dissociate oneself from apartheid—are all-important. By the late 1980s she can argue, "You have to show that you support not only change, but in my case that you support a complete revolution, if possible a peaceful one" (304). Once again, the interview-statements parallel not only the events of the age, but the tone and texture of Gordimer's fiction itself.

Despite her pronounced reticence to discuss her personal or private life, there are many moments in the later interviews in which the relation between the aura or milieu of Gordimer's past and the settings or moods of her texts is illuminated. This is particularly true of her descriptions of growing up in Springs (*The Lying Days*) and of life in Joburg during the freewheeling fifties (*A World of Strangers*). And the celebrated *Paris-Review* interview with Jannika Hurwitt (1979 and 1980) is here, in which Gordimer first described her lonely childhood and her over-close relation with her mother, who kept her out of school for five years from the age of eleven on the pretext of a heart ailment:

I had no contact with other children. I spent my whole life, from eleven to sixteen, with older people, with people of my mother's generation. She carted me around to tea parties—I simply lived her life. When she and my father went out at night to dinner she took me along . . . [sic] I got to the stage where I could really hardly talk to other children. I was a little old woman. (133)

The interview in which this revelation occurred took place in New York in the fall of 1979; in November that year Gordimer turned 56. As she remarks on the same occasion, "It's really only in the last decade of my life that I've been able to face all this. When I realized what my mother had done to me, I went through, at the age of twenty, such resentment . . . When I was thirty, I began to understand why she did it, and thus to pity her. By the time she died in '76 we were reconciled" (132). Three years after her mother's death the truth could be stated publicly. This rare insight into Gordimer's private life—quite foreign to the tone and manner of most of her interviews—is nevertheless typical of the usefulness of this volume. And equally typical of the political complexities and mine fields of the South African literary scene is the complaint made to me by a well-known South African literary figure that of course Gordimer had to make that revelation outside the country! As

Gordimer constantly explains in these collected conversations, she does not choose to write about politics; in South Africa, even private lives are controlled by politics:

whites among themselves are shaped by their peculiar position, just as black people are by theirs. I write about their private selves; often, even in the most private situations, they are what they are because their lives are regulated and their mores formed by the political situation. (35)

What development can be seen in this collection of Gordimer's dicta, and what light do they shed on her latest work? This is a complex question, and yet one that the "committed" tone of her last two books clearly raises. The outward consistency of the Gordimer point of view is modified by changes in emphasis.

In 1961 she argued that

[n]ovelty of subject-matter or point of view may give a fillip to mediocre writing, but the truly creative imagination is not dependent on the novelties but on the deep underlying sameness of all human experience. If Africans do dominate South African literature in the future, it will be because they have produced among their millions some great writers who will not be limited to the expression of the novelty of being black.(8)

And this conviction, of the high seriousness of art overriding political program or propaganda, has conditioned all her pronouncements on writing, the role of the writer, and the transcendent values of literature. In 1965 she asserted, "If I've been influenced to recognize man as a political animal, in my writing, then that's come about through living in South Africa" (35). And she went on to insist:

I honestly don't think I've ever sacrificed the possible revelation of a private contradiction to make a political point. My method is to let the general seep up through the individual, whether or not the theme can be summed up afterwards as "Jealousy," "Racial Conflict" or what-have-you. (35)

As late as 1988, a year after the controversial *A Sport of Nature* had appeared, she was still advocating artistic freedom. She acknowledges that "[i]t's very difficult to relax in South Africa. There's a war going on there. It's an undeclared war, but it's on." In that war, she argues, she

knows which side she is on, but insists: "from my point of view, I must take my freedom as a writer to show human beings as they are, warts and all. And if you don't, then you're becoming a propagandist. Propagandists are necessary, but I'm not one" (299). After reading a passage from *The Late Bourgeois World*, she continues: "The political content should be part of the essential truth. If the incident, the story, the book is placed in a milieu and at a time where part of the essential truth of that situation is political, then the political element must be there. But you can't judge a work of art by its political content" (299).

The change in emphasis in these passages is what distinguishes Gordimer's position in 1961 from that in 1988. In the stifling aura of apartheid-triumphant post-Sharpeville, Gordimer is implicitly defending her work against the white South African objection to its political (many opponents misread her fiction as "liberal"—to them a term of abuse) content. In the 1980s she is implicitly defending her creative integrity against militant black and white activists who insist that all writing must serve the liberation struggle, and that to claim artistic independence or freedom is to trivialize the role of writer and to join the forces of oppression.

Throughout her writing career Gordimer has had to steer between the Scylla of conservative white anger and the Charybdis of hostility from those—both black and white—totally committed to "The Struggle." In her early and middle period the criticisms from the Left were aimed at her bourgeois sensitivities and the niceties of her novelistic precision. In her latest period criticisms from a broader readership have been directed at the element of political commitment in the last three books and at what has been seen by some—who welcomed her earlier open-mindedness—as the doctrinaire tone of those texts.

A Sport of Nature (1987) was the first novel to raise these concerns. It was such a vast, kaleidoscopic work, however, that its range of moods, events, and tones offered a richness that offset the puzzlement caused by the behavior of its protagonist. Nevertheless, there was uncertainty. How was she to be taken? The irony consistently used by Gordimer in all her other works was elusive to some readers. The recurrent phrase, "Trust Hillela," captured the note of ambiguity or ambivalence because it echoed through the text with all possible nuances of voice: from scorn to frustration to "straight" praise or admiration. Similarly, the absolute "rightness" of Hillela's cause—the liberation of South Africa—is a

constant, unquestioned feature of the text, and yet her own tactics and those of her allies are often questionable; and is there not irony directed, *passim*, at many of those who actually bring in the millennium, while the text as a whole posits that millennial ending—the independence/liberation ceremonies in Cape Town—as an overpoweringly necessary goal?

Gordimer "explains" Hillela in a 1987 interview with Margaret Walters: "Perhaps there are more ways of being effective than we would allow. . . . And the most unexpected people, who you would have never thought could have done anything, have done this, have become effective in unconventional ways" (292). To be "effective" has become an overriding virtue in the dark, turbulent days of the late eighties. The need to investigate "effective" action—and to postulate a freak or sport of nature in order to do so—does indicate a change in Gordimer's agenda, however. The possibility of a general truth's growing out of the scrupulous imaginative creation of an individual truth is less in evidence here than an attempt to create a paradigmatic or symbolic truth. The emblematic element in *A Sport of Nature* is only part of that rich text, nonetheless. The evocation of the myopic Johannesburg white world, in which Hillela is a freak, resonates with all the skill of Gordimer's customary fictional approach. She mentions this obliquely in the 1987 interview:

she has seen so much emotional and moral prevarication. If you look at the people that she's lived among, she finds so little to trust that she comes really to the conclusion that the only thing that you can trust is your own body and your own feelings. The bed, at least, is honest. (293)

That "emotional and moral prevarication" in the world of Hillela's Aunt Olga and Aunt Pauline has been presented with all the ironic skill of Gordimer's traditional narrative method. And the cloying, suffocating verisimilitude of that Johannesburg aura does provide both a context for Hillela's freakishness and a textural abundance that her single-mindedness lacks. Incidentally, that single-mindedness of tone creeps into the interview-passage just quoted. Would Gordimer, in a less guarded moment, insist with so little cynicism or irony that "the bed, at least, is honest?"

In *My Son's Story* and the stories in *Jump* there is not that background richness, and their starkness of theme—"how to be a successful activist,"

or at least "this is how it *could* be to be a successful activist"—signals a change in Gordimer's approach.

She has not become a propagandist in these latest volumes. The cause—liberation and the liberation movement—is a presupposed good in many of the short stories and in the novel. Why it is such an all-encompassing goal is a topic that she pursues in these latest works, and in seeking to make real that transcendent preoccupation she becomes didactic rather than propagandistic. The players, themselves, even those who fearlessly further the cause, *are* presented with warts. The dirty side to liberation politics is not avoided. Alliances and betrayals are an integral part of the plot—and narrative expectation—in *My Son's Story*. The comrades are not depicted idealistically as perfect revolutionary heroes. What is idealistic—in the strict sense of the word—is the informing concept in many of these late texts: that the cause of liberation is immutable and will inevitably succeed; that the people themselves will endure and by their endurance triumph. That sense of a transcendent belief—at times an instinctive rather than a rational belief—in the inevitable return of the people to the land becomes the general truth that Gordimer seeks to illustrate with specific tales in imagined, individual lives. This is a change in her method. *The Conservationist* ends with a choric assertion of an anonymous dead man "returning" to the land in which currently dispossessed farm laborers bury him as the rightful inheritor of the land and the community: "he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them" (252). *Burger's Daughter* has, as one of its central interests, the transcendent nature of old-guard communists' commitment. *Something Out There* ends with a choric comment asserting the kinship of a racially mixed band of saboteurs with the autochthonous early inhabitants of the land. The extractable message in these middle texts is similar to that of the late texts, but their tone and texture are quite different. Gordimer has reached the point at which a choric ending is appropriate in *The Conservationist* and *Something Out There* (the ending of *Burger's Daughter* is more dramatic or dialogic than choric) because of the skill with which she has imagined the private predicaments of her characters. Her depiction of their private lives leads inevitably to the applied public conclusion she highlights, but the moral or political message has been—as she asserts in her interviews—"implicit," "carried in the lives of the people there and the way they are lived" (229).

In *My Son's Story* and many *Jump* tales the informing impulse is not to follow, imaginatively, a personal or private situation to its public conclusion, but rather to explain public phenomena with individual examples. And in pursuit of this goal the narrative voice in the late texts is much less resonant than the variety of voices used in the great middle texts like *The Conservationist* and *Burger's Daughter*.

Back to Gordimer's interview-explanations of her middle style. In 1980 she discussed with Stephen Gray her alternating between interior monologue and exterior narration in the novels. The method, she explained, is used "to get increasingly at what is really there. I suppose it comes about through finding that if you are drilling straight ahead, so to speak, you are constantly slipping and glancing off what is in the person, off the true center of their motivation and the conglomeration of circumstances and inherited attitudes that make up the inner personality" (178). The goal of such an approach is clearly a complex, imaginative whole, not a single, extractable message. In the same interview Gordimer defends herself against South African "complaints" about the "difficulty" of *The Conservationist*: "I made a tremendous effort to let the context spring its meaning upon the reader" (179).¹

The way the "context" of such a text "springs" its meaning on the reader involves what is not said, the way things are said, and what happens in the plot. "You need," Gordimer argued in 1980, "to use all the means at your disposal: the inner narrative, the outer, the reflection on an individual from other people, even the different possibilities of language, the syntax itself, which take hold of different parts of reality" (179). The rich complexity of this narrative approach entails constant personal revelation—not necessarily from the point of view of the characters themselves. Gordimer describes writing about Mehring, in *The Conservationist*, a character who lacks self-knowledge:

not through lack of intelligence, but out of fear—it was absolutely necessary to let him reveal himself, through the gaps, through the slightest allusions. In *Burger's Daughter* there are two things going—Rosa's conscious analysis, her reasoning approach to her life and to this country, and then there is my exploration as a writer of what she doesn't know even when she *thinks* she's finding out. (179)

In *My Son's Story* there is a variation between an external narrative voice and that of Will, the sullen son of the philandering, "coloured"

activist. But the gaps in Will's understanding—and in his father's—are telegraphed as part of the irony in the plot rather than in the presentation. The seemingly demure, dutiful, and sexually-betrayed wife of the schoolteacher becomes a more violent participant in the armed liberation struggle than her celebrated, conventional, much-imprisoned, sexually unfaithful schoolteacher husband, whose resistance politics are those of the politically faithful old guard. True, the two central male characters, father and son, have tremendous gaps in their understanding of the true nature of their wife/mother and daughter/sister. But this incomprehension is presented not as a quirkish part of the way the reader understands more about Will and his father, but rather as part of the explanation (and celebration) in the text of the quirks of revolutionary resistance. And in a sense the unexpected, unknown (almost unknowable) involvement of mother and daughter in the armed struggle is most appropriately part of that celebration because it is unknown and unknowable. Implicit in the political message is that there will always be an unexpected other to take up the arms of a suspended or eliminated comrade.

In *A Guest of Honour*, Bray's growing involvement in the politics of the newly-independent African country in which he is a visiting advisor is portrayed as part of his sexual reinvigoration. His political interest in Shinza, the left-wing political rival of his ruler-host is paralleled by his admiration for and jealousy of the man's easy sexual vigor. And Bray's own rejuvenation and revitalisation entail a similarly parallel process: his decision to *act* politically and his sexual affair with the young white woman, Rebecca. The affair itself is as delicately explored as the politics of the newly-independent state.

Outwardly this may seem similar to the parallel themes in *My Son's Story*: the public constancy of the old-guard political resister coupled with his private sexual perfidy; the obsession of the schoolteacher with his young white mistress—regardless of risk—and the obsessive nature of political commitment, equally regardless of risk, among members of the Movement. But Sonny remains a two-dimensional character, his personal actions and dilemmas presented as part of his "life-story" rather than as a living, unpredictable web of interlocking relationships, obligations, triumphs, and betrayals. The narrative tone remains explanatory (much more so in the passages of impersonal narration than in the sections written from Will's point of view) and what is being explained is a problem of loyalty, trust, and the possibility of action.

Toward the end of the book we have a passage which explains both Sonny's realization that he has become less important to the struggle than his exile wife and his anguish at his personal affair having been misunderstood. It is worth quoting at length because of its strangely flat, didactic tone:

had they not thought, what had got into his head, into his life, deflected him from purpose, the only purpose that mattered at the time when they couldn't do without him—what had got into his head was preoccupation with a woman. There is no place for a second obsession in the life of a revolutionary. But he had never neglected the cause, for her! She was enfolded, one with it, she had connected his manhood, his sexual power as a man, with it! She had given commitment the pumping of the heart. He was overcome with distress at this denial of her (in himself); at this injustice to himself. (263)

Not much play of irony or perspective here. Of course we are getting the point of view of Sonny himself, and the gaps in his understanding of himself are indicated (in his anger that the comrades *could* think about him *that way*). But there is little that readers come upon themselves in the passage. Gordimer has not left anything out, and the focus is on a simple rather than a complex issue of self-awareness or self-deception. She does appear to be "drilling straight ahead" (*Conversations* 178) and there is little evidence that she wishes to "let the context spring its meaning upon the reader" (*Conversations* 179).

Another passage shows a similar didactic straightforwardness, although there is a slight change in perspective. What is reflected is the ethos in which Hannah, Sonny's white, socially-committed lover, approaches her work with political trialists and prisoners:

The nature of the work she did develops high emotions. It arises from crises. It deals only with disruption, disjunction—circumstances in people's lives that cannot be met with the responses that serve for continuity. To monitor trials is to "monitor" the soaring and plunging graph of feelings that move men and women to act, endangering themselves; the curves and drops of bravery, loss of nerve, betrayal; cunning learnt by courage, courage learnt by discipline—and others which exceed the competence of any graph to record, would melt its needle in the heat of intensity: the record of people who, receiving a long jail sentence, tell the court they regret nothing; of those who, offered amnesty

on condition that they accept this as "freedom" in place of the concept for which they went to prison, choose to live out their lives there. Such inconceivable decisions are beyond the capacity of anyone who does not make one. (89)

This is a part of Hannah's world, and that world is what brings her and Sonny together. To this extent the passage is part of the personal narrative. But the intention in the lines is clearly didactic, even celebratory. Gordimer is explicitly using general examples ("people who," "those who") to explore a generalized political truth; and she is going to apply this truth to the personal tale of Sonny, his family, and his comrades.

Such a didactic tone recurs frequently in *My Son's Story*. In some of the stories in *Jump* the tone becomes gnomic.

This gnomic mode is at its most pronounced in the story, "Once Upon a Time," which, as its title indicates, is deliberately written as a parable or fable. "I began to tell myself a story; a bedtime story" (25). The ideal suburban family in it is described in heavily sarcastic, fabulous terms, "living happily ever after":

They had a little boy, and they loved him very much. They had a cat and a dog that the little boy loved very much. They had a car and a caravan trailer for holidays, and a swimming-pool which was fenced so that the little boy and his playmates would not fall in and drown. They had a housemaid who was absolutely trustworthy and an itinerant gardener who was highly recommended by the neighbours. (25)

Gordimer's interview-position—that she uses "the different possibilities of language, the syntax itself, which take hold of different parts of reality" (*Conversations* 179)—is in evidence here, although in a bludgeoning rather than subtle mode. The clichés of the white suburbs and the false certainties of that cocooned life are being mocked as they are mimicked, but with sarcasm rather than with irony. The central irony of the plot—the son crawls into the coil of house-protecting razor wire in an attempt to emulate the fairy tale "Prince who braves the terrible thicket of thorns to enter the Palace and kiss the Sleeping Beauty back to life" (30), and has to be cut out with wirecutters—is again mocking and dismissive. No individual truths leading to a general truth in this angry parable.

"Once Upon a Time" is by far the most exemplary story in *Jump*, but many others have a similar impulse informing them, even if they are not told in the fairy tale mode. "The Moment Before the Gun Went Off" is another exemplary tale, but it is told with the familiar Gordimer deadpan narrative until the final paragraph. While out on a buck-shooting expedition, the Afrikaner protagonist of the story accidentally shoots a favorite black farm worker when the farmer's rifle discharges inside the cab of his truck and hits the young black man standing up in the back. The concern of the various Afrikaner points of view in the early narrative is with the distortions such an accident will receive in the overseas press. But in a melodramatic ending, the emblematic nature of the tragedy is revealed to be not the callous victimization of the young black man as seen in the "liberal" anti-South African press, but the secret (and typical) closeness of the relation between the older white and younger black man:

How will they ever know, when they file newspaper clippings, evidence, proof, when they look at the photographs and see his face—guilty! guilty! they are right!—how will they know, when the police stations burn with all the evidence of what has happened now, and what the law made a crime in the past. How could they know that *they do not know*. Anything. The young man callously shot through the negligence of the white man was not the farmer's boy; he was his son. (117)

This is irony rather than sarcasm, but the manner of such a "significant ending" is far less subtle than in Gordimer's choric closing lines in *The Conservationist* or *Something Out There*. The encapsulated political moral of this revelation is not tacked onto the short story, neither is it arbitrary. But its exemplary quality is not implicit in the preceding narrative either.

There are moments in *Jump* that illustrate the Gordimer traits typical of her early and middle periods; those traits she is most at pains to discuss and illuminate in her interviews. But the volume shows a continuation of the trend begun in *My Son's Story* to the paradigmatic and the didactic.

This collection of interviews is an invaluable addition to any Gordimer library not only because it enables readers to trace the similarities and changes in Gordimer's pronouncements on her art over the years, but also because those pronouncements lead one to assess the changes themselves. *Conversations With Nadine Gordimer* has appeared at the moment at

which there could be a major shift of emphasis in Gordimer's fictional career. Her passions and convictions have not changed, but her manner may be in the process of transformation.

NOTE

1. Not only South African readers experienced "difficulty." The *TLS* reviewer of *The Conservationist* believed—despite its choric ending—that Mehring is buried in the final chapter. "The novel ends, as it began, with violent death. And though Mehring gets a decent burial on his own farm, he is really no better off than the flashily-dressed black, found robbed and murdered early in the novel, whom the police carelessly shovelled into the very same earth." (Valentine Cunningham, "Kinds of Colonialism," *TLS*, November 1, 1974: 1217.) The same mistake is made by Firdaus Kanga, also in *TLS*, some seventeen years later in a review article occasioned by the publication of *Jump* (Mehring is further mistaken as an Afrikaner): "The character of Mehring, the Afrikaner whose farm is as barren as his life, is drawn honestly but with humanity so that, despite the aridity of his soul, his death is moving" (Firdaus Kanga, "A Question of Black and White," *TLS*, October 11, 1991: 14).

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