

Introduction:

A “Scrupulously Personal Approach”: Introducing Nadine Gordimer’s Conception of Writing

Searching for Truth: “The Final Word of Words”

Speaking to the auditorium gathered at the Swedish Academy in Stockholm on 7 December 1991, Nadine Gordimer concluded her Nobel Lecture with the following, paragraph-long sentence:

The writer is of service to humankind only insofar as the writer uses the word even against his or her loyalties, trusts the state of being, as it is revealed, to hold somewhere in its complexity filaments of the cord of truth, able to be bound together, here and there, in art: trusts the state of being to yield somewhere fragmentary phrases of truth, which is the final word of words, never changed by our stumbling efforts to spell it out and write it down, never changed by lies, by semantic sophistry, by the dirtying of the word for the purposes of racism, sexism, prejudice, domination, the glorification of destruction, the curses and the praise-songs.¹

This statement is important enough to be quoted in full since it encapsulates the key beliefs that guided Gordimer throughout her writing career: first of all, that the responsibility of every writer is to look for truth; secondly, that this truth is to be found in life (“the state of being”), not in ideology of any kind, be it political or religious; and, most importantly, that since the role of literature is to give insight into truth unobscured by ideology, writers are

1 Nadine Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History: Notes from Our Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 206.

obliged to distance themselves from their political and social allegiances; indeed, they must be ready to scrutinize their ideological positions and, if needs be, criticize various misuses and manipulations of truth.

Two notions are of central importance in Gordimer's writing: life and truth, and where they appear, they are usually mentioned together. One non-fiction text in which those ideas recur is her lecture "Adam's Rib: Fictions and Realities" (1994), published three years after her Nobel Lecture. In "Adam's Rib," Gordimer pointed out that the role of writers is to observe people closely, remember fragments of those observations, and then transform those insights into literature. According to Gordimer, writers work in the dynamic medium of life, where that which is elusive is of no less importance than that which is graspable. The only stable principle in this medium is change understood as constant—and not always predictable—evolution of the characters' thoughts and motivations. On the basis of her understanding of life as dynamic and changeable, Gordimer formulated her version of truth based on faithfulness to other people's experiences. This fleeting kind of subjective truth, referred to as "a vapour of the truth condensed,"² can only be reached through creative imagination and talent. Taking this definition of subjective, experiential truth, she formed her understanding of fiction as "an enactment of life,"³ in which characters, defined as "imaginatively embodied discourse,"⁴ are revealed but at the same time keep some of their secrets to themselves, leaving both writers and readers in a state of tension between knowledge and conjecture. Gordimer's conception of literature, discussed at length in Chapter One, allows us to better understand her aim in writing not only her novels but also her shorter works; indeed, it is both justified and accurate to call her stories "enactments of life."

As I have mentioned, Gordimer argued that truth was to be found in the life of a given person, specifically the ambitions, desires, and motivations that drive this person in their actions. Exploring the life of the individual is what she referred to as a "scrupulously personal approach."⁵ This approach informed her writing well before her Nobel Lecture, which is evident from the fact that the quoted phrase is taken from her 1964 letter to her *New Yorker* editor Roger

2 Nadine Gordimer, *Writing and Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 12.

3 Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, 18.

4 Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, 18.

5 Gordimer to Angell, 1 May 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

Angell. In this letter, she explained that while the style of writing and subject matter of her short stories had naturally evolved over the years, one belief had remained unchanged:

I had hoped—and hope—to bring to to [sic] people who could be dismissed as categorical ‘victims,’ ‘oppressors’ etc., exactly the same scrupulously personal approach that I have always used for people whose labels are not so easily read—in fact, I have wanted to peel off the labels, as it were.⁶

In this passage, Gordimer uses the logic of disclosure to emphasize that her goal has always been to uncover the complexity of the human character—the subtle, sometimes conflicting forces governing people’s thoughts and actions. This is both an aesthetic and a social undertaking: aesthetic—because, as she believed, the quality of writing lies in its insightfulness, in other words, its ability to convey the truth about life; social—because in a conception of literature where the aesthetic is closely tied to the political, conveying the complexity of human motivations and thus exposing false perceptions is ultimately directed at bringing about social and political change, in this case, a change of attitude in the readers.

The conclusion of this brief, preliminary discussion brings us to the central argument in this book: Gordimer’s works are defined by her belief that while literature is shaped by politics, literary works are an adequate response to a given political situation only if they give us political, social, and psychological insight into the thoughts and actions of people living at a particular point in time. She elevated this insight to the level of truth, arguing that this truth lies in the complexity of human motivations and the dynamics of human interactions. It is not a factual but an experiential truth, and it can be defined as faithfulness both to the writer’s experience and to the experience of the people described. Insofar as experiential truth takes us to the interiority of a given protagonist, it is ambiguous and subject to change, as human beings are often driven by motivations that are neither consistent nor wholly understandable to them. Since this truth is only caught at a given point in the development of the protagonist, it is also fragmentary in its nature. This

6 Gordimer to Angell, 1 May 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

latter point is especially pertinent in the context of the short stories, which concentrate on a very limited time in the lives of their protagonists—sometimes even a few hours.

To show how Gordimer sought to convey the experiential truth about people living in her times is the main aim of this study. While the book will include references to her novels, its main focus will be on her short stories. It is important to read those works against the background of her changing political views but, at the same time, not to treat politics as the ultimate horizon of their interpretation. That Gordimer insisted on this irreducibility of her works can be read as an expression of her strong belief in the importance of writers who invest their efforts in the pursuit of the dynamic, fleeting, and unpredictable forces that shape human existence. Evident in this belief is the strong conviction that literature stands in opposition to political propaganda, whose aim is to describe human existence in terms of unambiguous and authoritative formulations. In this sense, seeking fragmentary, dynamic, and elusive truths about human existence is both an expression of fascination with life and a gesture of rebellion against various ideologists and propagandists, like those who created, developed, and enforced the doctrine of apartheid.

Gordimer's Stories: A Survey of Critical Perspectives

Gordimer once called the short story "the literary form that is both punishingly strict and yet wide and deep enough to contain a world—if you have the skill to handle it in microcosm."⁷ Gordimer's stories attest to her ability to create microcosms so complex and nuanced that they can safely stand comparison with the fictional worlds created in her novels. While Gordimer's stories have not yet received the critical attention they deserve, they have been the subject of some critical inquiries, both articles, essays, and book chapters. The aim of this section is to provide an overview of those critical studies, which will later serve as points of reference in the discussion of her stories.

Literary critics began to take a critical interest in Gordimer's works in the early 1970s. In the first full-length monograph devoted to her works, Robert F. Haugh's *Nadine Gordimer* (1974), Gordimer's stories are given pride of place: the book opens with four chapters examining her stories and continues with five

7 Nadine Gordimer, review of *The Hajji and Other Stories*, by Ahmed Essop, 1988. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

chapters that focus on her novels. In the introduction, Haugh puts emphasis on the stories, praising them for their insights into the reality of South Africa; as he writes, "to read her stories is to know Africa."⁸ Haugh's aim in this pioneering study is clearly to put Gordimer on the literary map for American readers, some of whom—by the early 1970s—must have heard of Gordimer since her stories were regularly published by leading American magazines and newspapers of the day. Adopting a tone that is disconcertingly laudatory and patronising at the same time, Haugh summarises at length Gordimer's stories, discussing both their strengths (above all, her gift of conveying the thoughts and emotions of her characters through epiphany) and their weaknesses (for example, what Haugh sees as her tendency to use her characters to voice her political opinions). What may strike the contemporary reader is his lack of interest in the social and political reality of South Africa: while he does make occasional references to racial segregation and the pass laws, his focus is on how the stories convey the psychological reality of the protagonists.

Gordimer's rise to fame as an internationally renowned writer is reflected in the articles and books published in the 1980s. In the mid-1980s, three notable articles devoted to Gordimer's stories came out: Barbara Eckstein's "Pleasure and Joy: Political Activism in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories" (*World Literature Today* 1985, vol. 59, no. 3), Evelyn Schroth's "Nadine Gordimer's 'A Chip of Glass Ruby': A Commentary on Apartheid Society" (*Journal of Black Studies* 1986, vol. 17, no. 1), and Martin Trump's "The Short Fiction of Nadine Gordimer" (*Research in African Literatures* 1986, vol. 17, no. 3). Eckstein's and Schroth's articles point to a new direction in Gordimer's criticism insofar as both of them focus on the socio-political reality described in her stories and give justice to the political dimension of those works. Eckstein's article is particularly noteworthy insofar as it gives valuable insight into the political motivations driving the protagonists of Gordimer's fiction. Unlike the critical interventions of Eckstein and Schroth, which focus only on a limited number of stories (only one in Schroth's case), Martin Trump's long article is a chronological discussion of Gordimer's short fiction, starting from the stories published in the 1950s and ending on those that came out in the early 1980s. Organized according to the themes and topics recurrent in her short fiction, Trump's study is intended as a neat and helpful guide for the critics interested in Gordimer's works; as such, it is also indicative of the growing critical interest in her oeuvre.

8 Robert Haugh, *Nadine Gordimer* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), 13.

Arguably, the most important critical study to emerge in the 1980s was Stephen Clingman's *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, first published in 1986, and reprinted in 1992 and 1993. Divided into seven chapters, each describing a new stage in Gordimer's political and aesthetic development, Clingman's study is a chronological discussion of the first eight novels by Gordimer from *The Lying Days* (1953) to *July's People* (1981).⁹ Also analysed in the book are fifteen stories by Gordimer, from those published in the 1940s and included in her first collection *Face to Face* (1949) to those that came out in the 1970s and were collected in *A Soldier's Embrace* (1981). Explaining his choice of material, Clingman argues that the novel as a literary form is more relevant in the context of his historically and politically focused analysis of Gordimer's fiction: "To put it simply, the novel is both more intensive and more extensive historically than the short story could ever be."¹⁰ It is due to this conviction that Clingman treats Gordimer's stories mostly as supplements to her novels, arguing that because of the confines of their form, the stories are incapable of giving the readers the complex and nuanced vision of "history from the inside" offered in her novels.

A more balanced critical perspective is adopted by Dorothy Driver in her essay "Nadine Gordimer: The Politicisation of Women," included in the collection *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer* (1990), edited by Rowland Smith. One of the first feminist readings of Gordimer's works, Driver's essay focuses on the novels, but it also gives justice to the nuanced presentation of women in her stories, especially those collected in the first three volumes. The early stories are also of interest to Kevin Magarey, who in his essay "Cutting the Jewel: Facets of Art in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories," also found in Smith's volume, gives a stylistic and structural analysis of Gordimer's stories published in the first four collections. While Magarey's article does register the political context of her works, its focus is clearly on the stories that depict the fears, desires, and ambitions of their white middle-class protagonists.

Gordimer's rise in popularity following her 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature led to a series of critical publications, one of which is *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer* (1993), edited by Bruce King. Divided into three parts, this volume includes

9 The 1993 Bloomsbury edition includes a Preface, in which Clingman briefly discusses Gordimer's later novels, including *A Sport of Nature* (1987) and *My Son's Story* (1991).

10 Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 19.

a section entirely devoted to Gordimer's short fiction, in which readers can find articles by Karen Lazar ("Feminism as 'Piffing'? Ambiguities in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories"), Alan R. Lomborg ("Once More into the Burrows: Gordimer's Later Short Fiction"), and Jeanne Colleran ("Archive of Apartheid: Nadine Gordimer's Short Fiction at the End of the Interregnum"). While Lazar's fine article is a feminist study of Gordimer's short fiction, Lomborg and Colleran focus their attention on the political context of her stories, acknowledging what Lomborg calls "one of Gordimer's persistent concerns—chronicling life in her country and the changes that evolve over the years."¹¹ This increased focus on the political is hardly surprising insofar as it reflects the evolution of her stories in the 1970s and the 1980s, but it is also true that the critics writing in the 1990s began to see the stories as a token of Gordimer's strong political engagement in the affairs of her country. This tendency can also be observed in Karen Lazar's two articles published in scholarly magazines: "Jump and Other Stories: Gordimer's Leap into the 1990s: Gender and Politics in Her Latest Short Fiction" (*Journal of Southern African Studies* 1992, vol. 18, no. 4) and the excellent study of Gordimer's novella "Something Out There" in "Something Out There/ Something in There: Gender and Politics in Gordimer's Novella" (*English in Africa* 1992, vol. 19, no. 1).

Gordimer's short fiction did not go unnoticed by authors of critical monographs devoted to her novels. Two such studies were published in the first half of the 1990s: Andrew Vogel Etti's *Betrayals of the Body Politic: The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer* (1993) and, more importantly, Dominic Head's study *Nadine Gordimer* (1994). In a chapter entirely devoted to her stories, Head mentions Robert Haugh's early study of her works, arguing that the short story has all too often been seen as a form that exemplifies "technical perfection"¹² and "aesthetic completeness."¹³ Situating himself in opposition to this viewpoint, Head points to ambiguity, or "productive ambiguity,"¹⁴ as a constitutive feature of the short story genre. His attention set on the silences and contradictions in Gordimer's stories, Head sheds light on Gordimer's exploration of the racist mindset (especially in first-person unreliable narratives)

11 Alan Lomborg, "Once More into the Burrows," in *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, ed. Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1993), 231.

12 Dominic Head, *Nadine Gordimer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 161.

13 Head, *Nadine Gordimer*, 161.

14 Head, *Nadine Gordimer*, 165.

and on her treatment of political activism, both in the context of white and black South Africans. Head's chapter also reflects the increasing (at the time) critical interest in how Gordimer's stories present social space and its control in a racist society (a topic that is central in John Cooke's *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes* (1985)).

Gordimer's popularity continued to attract the attention of readers and critics—including those from outside of South Africa—in the years immediately following the fall of apartheid. In 1995, Rose Pettersson published the critical study *Nadine Gordimer's One Story of a State Apart*, in which she explores the effects of the repressive political system of South Africa on the lives of the country's inhabitants, as depicted in Gordimer's novels, from *The Lying Days* (1953) to *My Son's Story* (1990). The year 2000 saw the publication of two monographs entirely devoted to her fiction: Ileana Dimitriu's *Art of Conscience: Re-reading Nadine Gordimer* and Brighton J. Uledi-Kamanga's *Cracks in the Wall: Nadine Gordimer's Fiction and the Irony of Apartheid*. While Uledi-Kamanga's study focuses on Gordimer's novels (although it should be added that he does mention several stories in his second chapter, and his fourth chapter is an extended discussion of the novella "Something Out There"), Ileana Dimitriu devotes one of three chapters to Gordimer's short fiction, discussing the stories collected in *The Soft Voice of the Serpent and Other Stories* (1952) and *Jump and Other Stories* (1991).

The first decade of the 21st century brought two more studies of Gordimer's fiction. In *Truer than Fiction: Nadine Gordimer Writing Post-Apartheid South Africa* (2008), Karina Magdalena Szczurek proposed informative and thorough analyses of her later novels and short story collections, including what remains the best critical inquiry into Gordimer's eleventh novel *None to Accompany Me* (1994). Four years later, the University of Cape Town Press released a translation of Denise Brahimi's collected articles titled *Nadine Gordimer: Weaving Together Fiction, Women and Politics* (2012). Focused mainly on novels, beginning with *A World of Strangers* (1958) and ending with *The House Gun* (1998), the study concludes with several brief but interesting insights into Gordimer's selected stories. Gordimer's novels are also at the centre of Maria-Luiz Caraivan's book *Nadine Gordimer and the Rhetoric of Otherness in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (2016), in which Caraivan investigates such topics as the legacy of South Africa's violent past, migration and exile, social and cultural alterity, and political changes in South Africa in the times of globalization. Several short stories,

both from early and later collections, are mentioned to complement the discussion of Gordimer's fiction, especially in the interesting discussion of exile in Chapter One.

While the critical studies mentioned above do contain chapters and passages that pertain to Gordimer's short fiction, it is academic journals that have published the most noteworthy analyses of her stories. Among the articles that came out after the year 2000 is Mary West's feminist reading of Gordimer's selected stories, "Portraits in Miniature: Speaking South African Women in Selected Short Stories by Nadine Gordimer" (*English in Africa* 2010, vol. 37, no. 1), and a series of articles by Ileana Dimitriu. One of the most prolific among Gordimer's critics, Dimitriu is the author of three fine articles on her post-apartheid fiction: "Shifts in Gordimer's Recent Short Fiction: Story-Telling after Apartheid" (*Current Writing* 2005, vol. 17), "Living in a Frontierless Land: Nadine Gordimer and Cultural Globalization" (*British and American Studies* 2011, no. 17), and "Novelist or Short-Story Writer? New Approaches to Gordimer's Short Fiction" (*British and American Studies* 2012, no. 18). Gordimer's post-apartheid stories were also explored by Graham Riach in his excellent article "The Late Nadine Gordimer" (*Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2016). Riach's study of Gordimer's late prose focuses on the collections *Jump* (1991), *Loot* (2003), and *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* (2007).

The most notable recent publication on Gordimer's stories is a 2019 issue of the journal *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* (vol. 41, no. 2) titled *Nadine Gordimer: De-Linking, Interrupting, Severing*. This important critical intervention includes eight articles, seven of which concentrate on her short fiction. In the introduction to the volume, Fiona McCann and Kerry-Jane Wallart, referring to Graham Riach's article, put forward the thesis that "interruptions, disruptions, disjunctions, cracks, breaks and fractures are still very much apparent in a number of [Gordimer's] works, early or late."¹⁵ This argument is taken up by Stephen Clingman in "Gordimer, Interrupted" (discussed at greater length at the end of Chapter One of this book), in which he sets out to demonstrate that interruption is the underlying logic of Gordimer's writing. Both Clingman and the editors of the volume view interruption as a possible new mode of reading Gordimer's works, but this methodology is only loosely followed by

15 Fiona McCann and Kerry-Jane Wallart, "Nadine Gordimer: De-Linking, Interrupting, Severing. Introduction," *Nadine Gordimer: De-Linking, Interrupting, Severing, Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 5, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.413>.

the contributors, who offer their own insights into Gordimer's fiction. In the article "[S]he Has a Knife in [Her] Hand': Writing/Cutting in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories," Pascale Tollance draws the readers' attention to the gaps and silences in Gordimer's short fiction, arguing that Gordimer's refusal to end stories with closure and resolution exposes the problems and divisions in her country. In "Nadine Gordimer's Strangely Uncanny Realistic Stories: The Chaos and the Mystery of It All," Liliane Louvel shows how Gordimer uses the mysterious and the uncanny to destabilize the reader's expectations. The most interesting and engaging part of the article is a syntactical analysis of Gordimer's prose, which shows how she consistently postpones the end of the sentence, thus forcing the reader to attend closely to the text. Among other notable studies in the volume is Kerry-Jane Wallart's "Failing to Place Confrontation: The Car as 'Void' in *Jump*," which focuses on Gordimer's descriptions of cars as spaces that convey the delusions and injustices of apartheid. Gordimer's post-apartheid fiction is also at the centre of Vivek Santayana's article "By 'the Flash of the Fireflies': Multi-Focal Forms of Critique in Nadine Gordimer's Late Short Story Cycles," which offers insights into South Africa's colonial past by investigating the non-linear and multitemporal character of Gordimer's short fiction.

The year 2019 also brought the publication of Rita Barnard's article "Locating Gordimer. Modernism, Postcolonialism, Realism," in which Barnard convincingly demonstrates that Gordimer's writing—both her novels and short stories—can be viewed as an example of "situated postcolonial modernism."¹⁶ It is worthwhile to add that Barnard is also the author of the study *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (2007), whose Chapter Two ("Leaving the House of the White Race") is one of the best—alongside John Cooke's *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes* (1985)—critical discussions of space in Gordimer's fiction, including her short stories.

Finally, it is worthwhile to note that Gordimer's stories have also been the subject of Chris Power's article "Rebel, Radical, Relic? Nadine Gordimer is Out of Fashion—We Must Keep Reading Her," published in *The Guardian* on 31 July 2019. Power's main argument is that following Gordimer's death

16 Rita Barnard, "Locating Gordimer," in *Modernism, Postcolonialism, and Globalism: Anglophone Literature, 1950 to the Present*, ed. Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 100–101.

in 2014, her stories have not received the attention they deserve. One reason for this fall in popularity is the enduring tendency to view her works only in the context of the historical situation in which they were created. As Power pointed out, “[Gordimer] was defined by a historical moment, the apartheid era, and now it appears she has been trapped by it.”¹⁷ Power’s engaging article was an attempt to re-introduce Gordimer’s short stories to the contemporary reader. This critical study hopes to achieve a similar goal by offering its readers the first comprehensive study entirely devoted to her short fiction. It is my contention that only a book-length study can do justice to Gordimer’s stories, showing their thematic and stylistic development across her seventy-year-long writing career.

Rereading Gordimer’s Stories: A Focus on Recurrence

Readers of Gordimer’s shorter works are likely to notice that they are governed by the logic of recurrence. A revealing comment on this pattern can be found in Gordimer’s introduction to *Selected Stories* (1975), in which she explains—among other things—the principles that lay behind her choice of stories for this book. She begins the introduction with the self-conscious comment that while none of the stories have been changed or rewritten for the present volume, the very process of selection was a kind of rewriting, in the course of which she came to the following realization:

[T]here are some stories I have gone on writing, again and again, all my life, not so much because the themes are obsessional but because I found other ways to take hold of them; because I hoped to make the revelation of new perceptions through the different techniques these demanded.¹⁸

Although this comment was made specifically in the context of stories from her first five collections, the insight also applies to the volumes that followed. Throughout her career as a short story writer, Gordimer returned to certain

17 Chris Power, “Rebel, Radical, Relic? Nadine Gordimer is Out of Fashion – We Must Keep Reading Her,” *The Guardian*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/31/rebel-radical-relic-nadine-gordimer-is-out-of-fashion-we-must-keep-reading-her>.

18 Nadine Gordimer, *Selected Stories* (London: Cape, 1975), 10.