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Françoise Král

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Symptomatology of an Unreconciled Nation: Nadine Gordimer's Collection of Short Stories *Jump*

Françoise Král
Université Paris Nanterre, CREA EA 370

In an article entitled '"Removing the Perpetuity of Hatred": on South Africa as a Model Example' French philosopher Barbara Cassin offered a reflexion on the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC was set up to avoid the blood bath which was likely to result from the end of apartheid and the unleashing of anger, repressed resentment and unprocessed trauma and negotiate a peaceful transition into the post-apartheid era. As a philosopher, Cassin's interest in the work of the TRC lies in attempting to account for the philosophical conditions which made the transition possible and in particular the choice made by the commission to encourage a form of justice of exception which favours the outcome of justice over the principles of Kantian morality as based on the autonomy of the individual and the universality of moral laws. Cassin contends that in order to move from apartheid to reconciliation and 'amnesty apartheid' (an expression she borrows from Philippe Joseph Salazar) we need to put in place a policy of remembrance, a policy of justice, and a 'policy of speech'.

The policy of remembrance is not only about forgetting in order to live with one's fellow citizens, but about constructing a common past in order to form a community that does not yet exist. The 'policy of justice' does not operate according to the lines of Kantian moral laws but rather according to the principles of Aristotelian politics which posits the centrality of the community, of the 'we-ness' over the individual, not for moral reasons but for pragmatic ones. Cassin's last criterion, the 'policy of speech', relies on a conception of language which does not normalize or neutralize apartheid violence, but allows victims and witnesses to engage with the fact of apartheid in and through language, taking the

potential of language to name, to label and to describe accurately and sometimes ruthlessly, to its radical point.

I propose to draw on Cassin's analysis of the performativity of language to understand how literature and the specific creative gesture of the writer – as represented in *Jump* – takes part in this transitional moment of re-shaping of the lines of power, at this particular juncture in the history of South Africa.[1] *Jump* was published in 1990, at a time when the end of apartheid was clearly on the horizon. The short stories which had already appeared in magazines abroad can be read as testimonies of an unglorious past, but they can also be read as charting the terrain for an encounter between an oppressed majority and a minority living in fear. They do not only sketch the contours of the post-apartheid nation but confront the reader with a violence which is not likely to abate; they transgress lines – and in particular the colour line – before these lines are lifted and as such they give form to the political struggles rather than narrating them *ex-post*.

I propose to reflect on this ethical imperative to make the embarrassing past audible, visible rather than living in denial. In an article entitled 'Pretence and Protest', Njabulo Ndebele argued that white South Africans live largely in denial as they amble "from one ethical challenge to the next […] locked in a space of anguish, [their hopes] constantly undermined by the persistence of a landscape of inequality and by recidivist acts of racism" (Ndebele 26). This landscape of inequality is exactly the type of landscape which is sketched in

[1] In '"Removing the Perpetuity of Hatred": on South Africa as a Model Example' Barbara Cassin quotes from the 1993 sunset clauses, which she refers to as "the birth certificate of the TRC": "This constitution provides a historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society characterized by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy, and peaceful coexistence and development opportunities for all South Africans, irrespective of colour, race, class, belief or sex. […] The adoption of this constitution lays the secure foundation for the people of South Africa to transcend the divisions and strife of the past which generated gross violations of human rights, the transgression of humanitarian principles in violent conflicts and a legacy of hatred, fear and revenge. These can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding but not for revenge, a need for reparation but not for retaliation; a need for ubuntu but not for victimization. […] With this Constitution and these commitments we the people of South Africa open a new chapter in the history of our country" (Cassin 236).

Gordimer's fiction and in particular in short stories such as 'Keeping Fit'; and as for the recidivist acts of racism, these loom large in the resilience of racial stereotypes and clichés which pepper some of the short stories such as 'Some Are Born to Sweet Delight.'

Facing the horrid truth rather than living in denial therefore requires to 'autopsee' the nation and come face to face with the full horror of apartheid and its wounds, both physical and moral. Critics have stressed the importance of history in Gordimer's fiction; Stephen Clingman, for example, has shown how rather than using history as a backdrop to her fiction, Gordimer brings out the historical consciousness of the era in which her fiction is set[2] – even if for Clingman, novels are better suited than short stories to engage with history (19). Jeanne Colleran has taken a similar line of inquiry in an article entitled 'Archive of Apartheid: Nadine Gordimer's Short Fiction at the End of the Interregnum', in which she contends that "all of Nadine Gordimer's fictional projects could be described as working to construct an archive of apartheid, a record which as an artist she is bound to keep, transcribing the 'consciousness of her era'" (237). I would like to offer a slightly different analysis which would stress not so much the anaphoric as the cataphoric dimension of Gordimer's writing – as a transitional collection of stories which bridges the soon-to-become past of apartheid with the post-apartheid era anticipated in certain stories – as well as the way she pushes the performativity of language to its radical point whilst openly doubting its effects.

The move from a system of apartheid to post-apartheid requires not only a creative leap to imagine the nation; it also requires some repair work so as to "turn human wrongs into human rights" as a famous graffiti reads on the wall of Desmond Tutu's house in Cape Town, and which Cassin mentions (Cassin 235). This repair work requires a narrative

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[2] For further discussion of historical consciousness, see the introduction to Stephen Clingman's book on Nadine Gordimer's novels, 'History from the Inside' (1-20): "At the same time as she engages with history she is moulded by the patterns and forces she must try to assess. As much as she is an observer of the life around her, she is still a social participant in what she observes. [...] it seems that of more significance historically than the world that a novel presents are the self-revealing features of its presentation. This, as it were, is the primary material that a novel offers : not so much an historical world, but a certain *consciousness* of that world" (2, emphasis in the original).

which does not erase but chooses to remember, a narrative which chooses *anamnesis* over *amnesia* (Cassin 237). In literary terms this implies writing a narrative which does not resolve traumatic memory into narrative memory, but which confronts, looks at, represents and recollects the horrors of apartheid by bringing the readers face to face with the carcass, the maimed body, the dismembered body. And indeed the short stories are replete with wounded bodies which range from maimed and mangled bodies (in 'Keeping Fit') to less serious injuries which often take on an allegorical meaning and become powerful signifiers. For example, the opening paragraph of the concluding story 'Amnesty' when the protagonist who is also the focal point – a young black woman – discovers that she has cut herself on the barbed wire at the moment when she learns that her partner has been released from jail.

> When we heard he was released I ran all over the farm and through the fence to our people on the next farm to tell everybody. I only saw afterwards I'd torn my dress on the barbed wire, and there was a scratch, with blood, on my shoulder. (Gordimer, 'Amnesty', 247)

The description of injuries, even minor ones, takes on a particular resonance as one of the guidelines of the TRC was to be exhaustive about listing pain, fear and horror.[3]

The whole difficulty is not so much to give an account of horror as to know where to stop. This implies neither demonizing nor aestheticizing, but more importantly refraining from working out the trauma. Trauma must be kept intact, fear must remain contagious and oblivion must be banned. Fear also needs to be confronted; it needs to be voiced and exposed, and this is something which Gordimer has repeatedly stressed in her interviews in the years leading up to apartheid and in her piece 'Living in the Interregnum' she explicitly put the question "what will happen to whites when the apartheid regime goes[?]" (Gordimer 1988, 263).

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[3] "Only an act that is 'fully disclosed' can be amnestied. 'Tell your story', so the expression goes. History is made up of stories, those of victims and tormentors alike, and with the telling both are at once perceived again as human beings. The definition of amnesty thus becomes 'freedom in exchange for truth' (Report, I, 293)" (qtd in Cassin 239).

I would like to illustrate this point with a brief analysis of 'Keeping Fit'. This short story operates a form of fictional transgression as the protagonist ventures beyond the confines of the white enclave and penetrates the forbidden space of the shanty town as the detailed mapping of a geography of exclusion points to.

> Sometimes he took a circuitous route back but this was the outward limit. Not quite a highway, the road divided the territory of Alicewood, named for the daughter of a real estate developer, from Enterprise Park, the landscaped industrial buffer between the suburb and the black township whose identity was long overwhelmed by a squatter camp which had spread to the boundary of the industries and, where there was vacant ground, dragged through these interstices its detritus of tin and sacking, abutting on the highway. (Gordimer, 'Keeping Fit', 230)

It is also a short story which works along the lines of the policy of memory which Cassin analyses, as it brings the reader face to face with the horrors of apartheid violence. This confrontation is not resolved in a narrative which alleviates the anguish and heals the pain. Quite the contrary, the protagonist remains haunted by this unresolved trauma and this is expressed through an almost Freudian displacement onto another object, the bird trapped in a pipe at the end of the short story, as the protagonist would rather have one of his boys go up the ladder to free the bird, rather than let the bird struggle and die. At the heart of the short story is an almost radical transition, which hinges on the reversal of the situation and which is highlighted in the use of animal imagery, the memory of tadpoles trapped in the pocket of his trousers when he was a child and which comes back to the protagonist at the beginning of the story. This memory works in a metonymic way and refers indirectly to the protagonist's situation at the mercy of a black crowd.

Genres and narrative choices play a crucial part in the sense that the resolution or irresolution of the plot is a statement in itself. 'Keeping Fit' takes up some of the codes of the gothic narrative as the protagonist wanders away from the residential area where he lives; "whatever" lives on the other side and lived in "whatever dirt and degradation" was tucked away behind a fence which "had collapsed under the pressure of shelters that leant against it and sections had filched to roof other shacks". The gothic trope of the partition between inside and outside, the Manichean

duality highlighted by the qualifier "wrong side of the road", the impression of group, crowd, multitude, unnamed life proliferating and threatening to come out results in a sort of fatal attraction as this life reveals itself, drawing the protagonist, compelling him and almost mesmerizing him, to come nearer. The whole story hinges on this pivotal moment, materialized by a hyphen "But as he turned to go home – it burst open, revealing itself" ('Keeping Fit', 231).

> Of course, they kept chickens among whatever dirt and degradation was behind that fence. He must have done another couple of kilometres; there were no more factory buildings but the shanties occupied the land all along the other side of the road. Here in places the metal fence had collapsed under the pressure of shelters that leant against it and sections had been filched to roof other shacks, yet the life in there was not exposed to the road because the jumbled crowding of makeshift board and planks, bits of wrecked vehicles, cardboard and plastic sheeting closed off from view how far back the swarm of habitation extended. But as he turned to go home – it burst open, revealing itself. ('Keeping Fit', 231)

What follows is a scene of the utmost brutality as the protagonist finds himself face to face with a group of men, before realizing that they are after someone else, whom he thought was one of them. What is at stake is a confrontation with fear, and the extreme awe inspired by the fear of being attacked by this crowd of men; here Gordimer writes about the intimate fear riveted at the heart of the white minority, that of the blood bath which she spoke about in 'Living in the Interregnum' but which in the years leading up to the end of apartheid started to loom with more intensity.

The second confrontation is with the mangled body, the carcass which lies at the heart of the text both in a cataphoric movement, what might happen to white South Africans, but also as the dead, or dying man all South Africans have to face and come to terms with, so as to exert this policy of memory which Cassin urges them to do. The use of pronouns or common nouns creates a disturbing sense of anonymity as anyone could be that man. This loosely defined space of interaction prompts a movement of interaction in which one has to confront both the victim and the perpetrator of violence and imagine oneself in either of these positions.

> The man's shirt was ripped down the back, another hobbled wildly with one shoe lost, some wore red rags tied pirate-style round their heads, knobbed clubs swung above them, long pieces of wire strong and sharp enough to skewer a man armed them, one loped with a sledge-hammer over his shoulder, there were cleavers, and a butcher's knife ground to sword-point and dangling from a bracelet of plaited red plastic. They were bellowing in a language he didn't need to understand in order to understand, the stink of adrenaline sweat was coming from the furnace within them. ('Keeping Fit', 232)

This transition to post-apartheid also requires that we sketch the outlines of a neutral space where interaction between black and white citizens becomes possible, where venturing beyond the partition is no longer taboo, where the home is not broken into and where characters can freely interact. In other words, it requires that we draw on the hospitality of anonymity to sketch the contours of the nation, or, as Jeanne Colleran put it:

> The activity of reading diacritically, at the edges of certain social sites, in the centre of others, is a corollary to the kind of *political education* that Gordimer deems necessary for white South Africans who must move – conceptually, physically – outside of their protected enclaves […]. (Colleran 230, my emphasis)

I would like to pick up on this idea of a political education of the reader to analyse two ways in which the short stories achieve a space of political encounter through fiction and partake of this strategy to work out the political sense of the reader. The deeply-ingrained fractality of apartheid makes it necessary to carve out a new space free of racial determinations within the imaginary of the nation (Anderson). No nation, no political entity can exist without a leap of faith from the positionality of the subject to the proposed horizon of the nation, as a collective entity, and this transitional move cannot happen without a fiction – the nation as a category which has not yet materialized. Political philosophy from Rousseau, Hobbes to Lyotard and more recently Rancière has stressed in more ways than one the performative axis deployed in the move from what Cassin calls 'idio-cy' to 'we-ness' (Cassin 236).

This fictional enactment of an imaginary of the nation takes various forms in the fiction of Gordimer; it is performed metonymically by

transgressions of the colour bar – of the lines which make the separation between the white residential areas and the black townships materialize – for example in 'Keeping Fit'. This transgression operates on various levels, that of the white protagonist's transgression of this line, that of the reader sneaking a peak into the home of the black woman who offers him shelter, and it also operates at the level of the reader who, a couple of years before the end of apartheid, enters the home of a black family on the 'wrong' side of the palisade. In his book on Nadine Gordimer, Stephen Clingman writes that unlike Orwell who, when writing about the workers of Wigan, could have gone and lived there for as long as he wanted, Gordimer could not go and live among black people in South Africa (16). The colour line which was enforced on various levels (education, sexuality, marriage, and housing) grounded firm lines which were not to be transgressed in any way. There is therefore something extremely powerful and almost dystopian in 'Keeping Fit' when the protagonist ventures away from the aptly named Alicewood to fall down the hole or rather stumble on the other side of the palisade.

Another type of transgression occurs within the text, at the very point when characters are introduced, revealed in the photographic sense of the term, and when the narratorial voice retains as much information as it unveils, in terms of facts and specificities. These transgressions open up a space of exchange between blacks and whites which relies on the performativity of speech. Gordimer therefore creates a space of transitional anonymity where lines of personhood dissolve, at least temporarily, through strategies of delayed telling and the consistent use of pronouns as opposed to names as evidenced in the following opening pages.

> He's one of those dark-haired men whose beards grow out rusty-red. He could have dyed his hair to match […] ('Safe Houses', 183)

> Lighted windows: cutouts of home in the night. When he came from his meeting he turned the key but the door was quickly opened from the inside – he was there, Teresa, a terribly vivid face. ('Home', 191)

> When we heard he was released I ran all over the farm and through the fence to our people on the next farm […] ('Amnesty', 247)

Many short stories work according to the same principle; rather than introduce characters who are defined as clearly delineated individuals – both in terms of social class and race – the narrative is situated in a sort of vacuum of anonymity – which makes it difficult to identify and pin down both the focal point and the observed character. The ambiguity is lifted after a few pages, but when it is lifted, a connection has already been established between the reader and the characters.

This way of introducing characters as sketches later to be revealed – in the photographic sense of the term – is often used by writers when dealing with race as the narrative voice always calls for a fully fleshed out body which we, readers, like to portray in terms of gender, race, age and social positioning. In the same way, the characters are unveiled after a few pages; they first appear as silhouettes who position a presence, and from this presence onward, a relationship is established with the reader. This connexion we accept in all its indeterminacy creates a space for encounter and delineates an area of hospitality which appears as a category-free space, a taxonomic no man's land.

Colleran's idea of political education not only applies to the reader who is ushered into a transitional space of temporal anonymity which forces him to interact across social and racial lines and with characters who have not yet been fully defined; it also operates within the diegesis. 'Comrades' provides a good example of a short story which educates readers politically, as the protagonist is taken through a process of political initiation which forces her to confront her ideas as white liberals to the reality of the political challenges of South Africa. 'Comrades' is very eloquent in this respect as it foregrounds the issue of the policy of language, not only in the sense used by Cassin (making sure that language is used adequately, that it accurately qualifies the political situation so that the horrors become fully visible rather than concealed), but in the sense of making sure that language indeed means what it says and makes people do what they say they are going to do. In other words, it is the performativity of language which is at stake.

'Comrades' narrates the encounter between a white middle-aged woman and a group of young ANC supporters who have come to town to attend an event that she is part of. The moment they tap at the window of her car after the conference is a moment of truth as she cannot repress a feeling of awe now that she is out on the street, a vulnerable middle-aged white woman. The whole story stresses this denial of fear and prejudice while clichés resurface throughout the text, suggesting that while South

Africa boasts liberal ideas and an absence of prejudices, prejudices are resilient and the colour bar is not a thing of the past.

> As Mrs. Hattie Telford pressed the electronic gadget that deactivates the alarm device in her car a group of youngsters came up behind her. Black. But no need to be afraid; this was not a city street. This was a non-racial enclave of learning, a place where tended flowerbeds and trees bearing botanical identification plates civilized the wild reminder of campus guards and dogs. ('Comrades', 91)

The third-person narration, focalized through Hattie, offers a privileged entry point into her thoughts which pedal old clichés. These opening lines allow us to catch a glimpse at what lies behind the scenes of white middle-class life and measure the extent to which there is a lack of connection between language and the real. In other words, the incipit urges us to reflect on the performativity of language.

> – Comrade…. – She was settling in the driver's seat when one so slight and slim he seemed a figure in profile came up to her window. He drew courage from the friendly lift of the woman's eyebrows above blue eyes, the tilt of her freckled white face: – Comrade, are you going to town? – ('Comrades', 91)

When addressing her the young man requires that she becomes what she calls herself, a comrade, and summons her to stop using language as an empty signifier.

Desmond Tutu said that one of the dangers of language was its misled performativity, as "Language, discourse and rhetoric, *does* things; it constructs social categories, it gives orders, it persuades us, it justifies, explains, gives reasons, excuses. It constructs reality. It moves certain people against other people" (Extract from the TRC report, Tutu III, §124).[4] Gordimer's stories repeatedly insist on the accountability of language to fulfil the performativity it claims to be endowed with. In 'Comrades', it holds Hattie responsible for the words she utters, for the discourse that white liberals have uttered in the conference room, whilst guarding us against the lures, the void, the empty signifiers as it becomes obvious that her protagonist, Hattie Telford, uses educated, precise,

[4] Qtd in Cassin (241).

sometimes technical language, but the deeds are not there. Her realization that these young men need 'carbohydrate' doesn't give them a proper meal, but a few meagre sandwiches which she prepares with the black maid so as not to show that she is a privileged white woman. She serves them on her own, symbolically depriving the maid of the results of her labour. In other words, white guilt and hypocrisy lead her not only to exploit the black labour force but to appropriate the product of her labour. In other words, Hattie's hypocrisy results in making the black maid even more invisible.

> There is an urgent exchange of eye-language, and the spokesman holds out the emptied sugar-bowl to her. – Please. – She hurries to the kitchen and brings it back refilled. They need carbohydrate, they are hungry, they are young, they need it, they burn it up. She is distressed at the inadequacy of the meal and then notices the fruit bowl, her big copper fruit bowl, filled with apples and bananas and perhaps there is a peach or two under the grape leaves with which she likes to complete an edible still life – Have some fruit. Help yourselves. – ('Comrades', 94-95)

In this scene Hattie symbolically hands back the resources of the country, the fruits served in a copper bowl, "her big copper fruit bowl", she thinks, as though trying to reassure herself that it is still hers. This passage also betrays the fact that the nation whose outlines are about to be drawn again lacks a language in common, a common ground on which they can all stand and have a meaningful exchange: "When she tries to talk to one of the others, he says *Ekskuus?* And she realizes he doesn't understand English, of the white man's languages knows perhaps only a little of that of the Afrikaners in the rural town he comes from" (94).

This political education, which requires that language be used responsibly also rests on an incentive to come to terms with the real, not as a fiction, not as a construct but as that which remains once speech has been uttered and performance has been done. I would therefore be tempted to add a fourth category to Cassin's three policies of memory, speech and justice so as to unpack their common denominator – the real – as Gordimer's fiction urges us to face the real as that which is left once language has been spoken, when memory has been reminisced and when justice has been rendered. In other words, truth as performativity which has reached its goal.

The short story 'Some Are Born to Sweet Delight' is very emblematic in this respect as this story tackles the difficult theme of terrorism without mentioning it explicitly, until the end of the story hinges on a double movement of typification and dissolution of archetypes. It takes quite a few hints in the form of stereotypes peppering the text to make the opening line understandable. The initial anonymity and indeterminacy sketched by the pronouns is progressively filled by the string of stereotypes which lead the reader to understand that the protagonist is a 'foreigner' from an anglophone country and probably a Muslim: "no Irish. But to discriminate against any other foreigners of the Old Empire was against the principles of the house owners" (69). Stereotypes pile up, either explicitly mentioned or merely suggested ("he didn't hang around the kitchen, hoping to be asked to eat with the family, the way one of his own kind would" (70); "he was clean and tidy enough"; "he didn't eye Vera" (70), which implies that he might have done). The short story gradually circles a space of interaction and exchange in which the reader engages with this underdefined protagonist. The conclusion comes as a shock, albeit a predictable one which quite disturbingly seems to reinforce the truth of the cliché and let the predictability of the situation triumph. This short story is probably amongst the most ambiguous ones in the collection as it hinges on the abrasive confrontation with the ugly side of South Africa's transition to post-apartheid; the resilience of the hatred, which manifests itself in the clichés, in the rather abrupt ending to the story.

In 'Living in the Interregnum' (1982) Gordimer wrote:

> In the official South African consciousness, the ego is white: it has always seen all South Africa as ordered around it. Even the ego that seeks to abdicate this alienation does so in an assumption of its own salvation that in itself expresses ego and alienation. And the Western world press, itself overwhelmingly white, constantly feeds this ego from its own. Visiting journalists, parliamentarians, congressmen and congresswomen come to South Africa to ask whites what is going to happen there. They meet blacks through whites; they rarely take the time and trouble, on their own initiative, to encounter more than the man who comes into the hotel bedroom to take away the empty beer bottles. With the exception of films made clandestinely by South African political activists, black and white, about resistance events, most foreign television

> documentaries, while condemning the whites out of their mouths, are nevertheless preoccupied with what will happen to whites when the apartheid regime goes. (Gordimer 1988, 263)

In this essay I hope to have shown some of the ways in which Gordimer not only destabilizes this white South African ego, either by unmaking its fragile surface and evidencing the powerlessness of the superego, but also by spanning a large spectrum of characters who lend a voice not only to South Africa but also to a repentant white apartheid supporter, a middle-aged white man, or an educated black farm-girl in the closing story 'Amnesty.' However, Gordimer's fiction remains ruthlessly realistic in its depiction of the resilience of parochialism, prejudices and cultural stereotypes, which short-circuit the areas of encounter opened up by certain techniques and in particular the use of pronominal anonymity.

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