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The Resurgence of Hidden Identities: The Burden of Ancestry in Nadine Gordimer's "Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black"

Rim Makni-Bejar

- 1 *Beethoven was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* is Nadine Gordimer's latest work of fiction, published in November 2007. In South African literature, where works are classified under three main, chronology-based headings, dates of publication influence the way we read. These periods are apartheid, transition and post-apartheid. Since the beginning of the transition period, there have been speculations about the future "state-of-the art-fiction" of the last in the context of the "new" era. Defining the features and characteristics of this post-apartheid literature (in English as far as we are concerned), unique within postcolonial studies, is the subject of an abundant criticism. The question I am asking here is whether one can define a continuous present moment always in the making, either in terms of form characteristics or thematic choices. In what follows, I take the title story "Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black" in order to test the advantages and disadvantages of this "post"-as-present by applying it to Gordimer's latest (and "late") style.
- 2 Gordimer defines the short story as "the flash of fireflies" where contact as well as the quality of human life are "in and out, now here, now there, in darkness" ("The Flash" 180). Short story writers see by the light of this flash, she says, "theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of - the present moment. Ideally, they have learned to do without explanation of what went before and what happens beyond this point" ("The Flash" 180). This colour-centred title story is about the resurgence of the past, where what went before the present moment is part of it. This is confirmed both by the narrative technique as Gordimer explains the importance of the protagonist's militant and progressive stance during apartheid and by the plot, as Frederick Morris mounts a search to find potential (and desired) mixed-blood relatives who might have come from

what he terms “incidents far back” (9). Even the fraction in the title indicates how “past” and “post” inform each other.

- 3 One of the challenges of post-apartheid literature is to look at the text as text for its artistic techniques and not only as reportage or witness wrought by historical changes. Gordimer herself believes that as the period of disintegration is replaced by new social forms and the art form that express them, one ceases to have to embrace the dreariness of conventional “social realism” in literature (“The Flash” 181). Social realism need not be “dreary” of course. Gordimer’s reflections became more nuanced in her later essays and fiction. In *The Essential Gesture* (1988), speaking again about her own writing of short stories, she accepts the inextricable relation and mutual influence of “social attitudes” on writing and *vice versa* (115). More recently, in *Writing and Being* (1995), she speaks of “the ontological relation of fiction to reality” and mentions “Primo Levi’s metamir” (13). Gordimer does not seek to ward off “social realism” any longer as in the 1968 essay. But what strikes one when looking at “Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black” is that despite the meaningful “shifts in social attitudes”, its art form is far from new (*The Essential Gesture* 115). The voice is still that of the progressive and educated white man, reminding one to some extent of the character of Mehring in *The Conservationist* (1974). The phased development of the story, as well as the revelation of Morris’s past and his identity quest, unearth the contradictions between historical fact and the ambiguous issue of self knowledge.
- 4 The voice that prompts Frederick Morris’s action comes from an unexpected source, the radio. A remark made in a classical music program that “Beethoven was one-sixteenth black” triggers his fantasy about his own possible identity and his desire for a black family. This phrase, which became the title of the story, both grips the reader and invites interpretation by its absence of punctuation. The remark recalls the old obsessions with skin colour, as Morris tries to racialize the disembodied radio voice. He identifies the speaker as “irremediably white” (3). Moreover, the distant thread of black blood evokes for Morris the name of another one sixteenth-black genius, the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin.¹ And he is envied because his is a substantial claim of blackness, unlike Morris’s: “look at this *genuine* frizz on the head – not some fashionable *faked* Afro haloing a white man or woman, but coming, it’s said, from Ethiopia” (4, my emphasis). This sentence is revealing. First, it revives the old theories about skin and hair as identity attestations. The frizz reminds us of “the fine-tooth comb” test, once used by Afrikaners to define a person’s colour according to the nature of his/her hair. Second, hair and blackness recur in phrases such as “scratching” the white man, “lank and straight hair”, “Caucasian blood mixture”, “genes” and “DNA tests” (12-13), reversing the process as a yearning for what was formally despised. Along with the “substantial” versus “faked” black lineage dichotomy, these restore the old dilemma of white belonging and legitimacy in Africa in general and South Africa in particular. Morris’s situation is continuous with Gordimer’s essay of 1959, in which she considers the claim of whites to be Africans: “But belonging to a society implies two factors which are outside reason: the desire to belong, on the one part, and acceptance, on the other part (...) the intangibles that make up emotional participation and the sense of belonging cannot be legislated for” (“Where Do Whites” 32-33). One might add a last comment on the Pushkin presence in the story. One of the form characteristics he is known for is irony, a device with which Gordimer is familiar. The biggest irony I point out here is the nature of Morris’s teaching subject, biology. The old colonialist

associations of race and genius resurface, the only difference is that they are reversed. Morris tells us that “history’s never over; no more than biology.” (4)

- 5 In the remaining part of the paper, I will try to explain this re-emergence of identity uncertainties in Gordimer’s work, which had been reduced for a while, not only in spite of legislation, but legitimated by Thabo Mbeki’s 1996 address “I am an African” which recognized white belonging in the official institutional discourse of “the new South Africa”.
- 6 History is never over, and that is the essence of resurgence. It is important here to understand that “Struggle credentials” are an indirect way to classify people in “the new South Africa”. Gordimer’s choice of Morris’s job as an academic who faces, in the “new millennium times”, the protests of the black students majority against “academe as the old white male crowd who inhibit transformation of the university from a white intellectual’s country club to a non-racial institution with a black majority” is also significant (4). The revelation of Morris’s past as a liberation activist only emphasizes the insignificance of such a detail for the students. Despite his history as a dissident, for the students he remains a part of the other “gowned” white body (4). Morris was “an amateur cartoonist of some talent who made posters depicting the regime’s leaders as the ghoulish murderers they were and more boldly joined groups to paste these on city”, but this participation in the struggle is minor compared to the involvement and suffering of the black population under the apartheid regime (4). The rejection of white academics by the black students echoes the racial and nationalist considerations that rejected the idea of inter-racial solidarity in South Africa forty years earlier. Gordimer has some experience of this rejection. Her disenchantment with her early liberalism is in part due to the total denial of whites by The Black Consciousness Movement, which was in part a student movement then.
- 7 In her 1968 essay on short story theory, Gordimer wrote that this art form is “another sign of the increasing loneliness and isolation of the individual in a competitive society” (“The Flash” 181). The competition in “Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black” is meant to be over legitimacy and belonging. This, of course, could attend to a different aspect of social realism. In fact, the economic and social measures undertaken by the post-apartheid governments, especially Thabo Mbeki’s, to empower the “black” population that has been negatively affected by the previous system of apartheid through the affirmative action process known as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) have resulted in precisely the opposite of what they were intended to change: they encourage racial competition.²
- 8 The revival of racial sensitivities in a country supposed to have come to terms with its past, more than the estrangement of whites is what Gordimer denounces in this story. Nonetheless, the old identity uncertainties seem to transform into certitude the shifting territory of white belonging as it is revealed through the use of punctuation in the text. In the earlier work, whether fictional or non-fictional, Gordimer has considered the place of whites in the South African society, shaping her stories to address sometimes unanswerable questions. This characterised essays such as “Where Do Whites Fit In?” (1959), or short stories such as “Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?” (1962). But in “Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black”, these same interrogations are no longer followed by question marks but by full stops like in: “you’re not responsible for your ancestry, are you.” (7), or in “So where am I from.” (15), and in “what was it all about.” (15) And each time these occur as fragments, as if to

convey the fragmentation and instability of white belonging, an unanswerable problem which confronts the arbitrariness of categories as well as their status as everyday received ideas. Immigration is one of those categories. Gordimer's post-apartheid fiction has seen a resurgence of this "buried" facet of white identity (*The Pickup* 48). In *The Pickup* (2001) for example, she uses the ambiguous and paradoxical expression of "immigrants by descent" to define generations of white South Africans (48). In "Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black", she also traces back Morris's origins to emigration, in a similarly defamiliarizing tendency. The protagonist bears the surname of "Walter Benjamin Morris [who] apparently was always called Ben, perhaps because he was indeed the Benjamin in a brood of brothers who did not, like him, *emigrate to Africa*." (5, my emphasis). Of course, one emigrates from, not to. It might be an editing miss, but it is not the first time Gordimer uses the term ambiguously. If history endorses realism, ambiguity aligns those revelations to literary modernism.

- 9 One must not think, however, that Gordimer is engaging in a process of victimization of the white section of the population. Morris's futile search (she intimates from the start that it is doomed to failure) condemns his own clinging to the comfortable and homely situation of privilege. The narrator questions the real claim of his search and wonders whether it is not an attempt at privilege (again a question form that ends with a full stop in the text). For "the standard of privilege changes with each regime" says the narrator; the claim to blackness is an attempt to remain part of "the ruling class whatever it may happen to be" (15). The following words: "once there were blacks wanting to be white. Now there are whites wanting to be black. It's the same secret" function as a refrain in this story (15). But Gordimer's attitude is not based on the irrelevant dualism of Black vs. White. On the contrary, she tries to bring together all the reasons behind such a split, or such reversed racism: the black survivors with no university education moving on to the high circles in cabinet posts and board rooms, themselves critical of the reform of education and ready to condemn the students who trash the facilities, rubbishing what the Struggle was fought for. Gordimer capitalizes "Struggle" in her text because she thinks of it as a resurgence, something "that's never over, never mind history-book victories" (15). "History-book victories" makes the past's presence explicit, informs the "post" in this story. It defines the contours of the present but does not guarantee its success. On the other hand, the "post"-in-the present influences Gordimer's own interpretation of the past and its vestiges.
- 10 The "post"-in-the present does not appear in "Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black" for the first time. The "burden of ancestry" is a phrase that appeared first in Nadine Gordimer's previous collection of short stories, *Loot*, published four years earlier in 2003. But there the burden referred to was the "traditional" white guilt over colonization and the slave trade. In a story entitled "Mission Statement", Roberta Blayne, an Englishwoman working in South Africa for an international aid agency, is confronted with the site of her "shameful" family history as she visits what used to be the Buffalo Mine, a slave plantation, owned in the 1920's by her white grandfather. In "Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black", the background of the story is the old diamond mine in the town of Kimberley, the Big Hole, where Morris's grandfather once aspired to make a fortune thanks to the small rough stones dug for him by black men and to which Frederick hopes to trace back his fantasized black origins. Though both places symbolize the burden of settlers' colonization and economic subjugation of blacks, and though they are only remnants of the past, they inform the present in two different ways. In the 2003 story, the accidental visit of the protagonist, Roberta Blayne, to this

place allows her to “blubber out her shame” and to “absolve” her from her burden of ancestry (65). The mine has disappeared and given way to a farm run by a black family. Hence, the present grows over the past “safely” as Gordimer puts it (45). In the 2007 story, the Big Hole is the landscape turned to as the (non)solution. In “Mission Statement” the stress is rather on the optimistic move of the new era into globalism, while the nation’s past and present seem at a deadlock in “Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black”. The short deadpan comment that concludes the story reveals Gordimer’s pessimism and even, one can venture, her historical cynicism. The hole is deep says Morris. To conclude, one might say that (new) themes and (old) ideas of short story writing are brought together here as for Gordimer, “a short story occurs, in the imaginative sense. To write one is to express from a situation in the exterior or interior world the life-giving drop –sweat, tea, semen, saliva –that will spread an intensity on the page, burn a hole in it” (“The Flash” 117).

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NOTES

1. Pushkin was a great-great-grandson of a black Abyssinian. Ethiopian, we would now say, or Somali.
2. “Black ” is a generic term which means the different categories of people the apartheid government systematically excluded from meaningful participation in the country’s economy: African, Indian and Coloureds.

ABSTRACTS

L'article interroge la possibilité d'écrire un moment présent continu déterminé par le poids du passé dans "Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black" (2007) de Nadine Gordimer. Cherchant une validation raciale dans la "nouvelle" Afrique du Sud, le protagoniste de cette nouvelle, un universitaire blanc ancien activiste anti-apartheid, entreprend de vaines recherches pour trouver des parents métis qui auraient pu être engendrés par son ancêtre. Cette quête identitaire imaginée par Gordimer laisse paraître le regain des sensibilités raciales dans un pays censé avoir assumé son passé racial et raciste treize ans après les élections de 1994. La certitude biologique et le fait historique s'opposent ainsi à la question plus ambiguë de l'identité personnelle. En s'intéressant à la question "d'où est-ce que je viens?" qui obsède le protagoniste et rythme la nouvelle, cette étude essaie de démontrer comment les incertitudes identitaires resurgissent dans l'œuvre postapartheid de Nadine Gordimer. Les problèmes d'appartenance et d'origine deviennent, avec ce dernier recueil, caractéristiques de ses nouvelles.

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