The Irony of Tenses in Nadine Gordimer's "The Conservationist"

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IN THE TWENTY-SEVEN unnumbered sections of *The Conservationist*, Nadine Gordimer's narrative employs either the simple past or the narrative present — a tense not used so consistently in her other works. Now this alternation of tenses cannot be gratuitous if one considers the degree of artistic sophistication of a novel whose narrative complexities are already manifest in the opening section.

> Pale freckled eggs.
>
> Swaying over the ruts to the gate of the third pasture, Sunday morning, the owner of the farm suddenly sees: a clutch of pale freckled eggs set out before a half-circle of children. Some are squatting; the one directly behind the eggs is cross-legged, like a vendor in a market. There is pride of ownership in that grin lifted shyly to the farmer's gaze. The eggs are arranged like marbles, the other children crowd round but you can tell they are not allowed to touch unless the cross-legged one gives permission. The bare soles, the backsides of the children have flattened a nest in the long dead grass for both eggs and children.
>
> The emblem on the car's bonnet, itself made in the shape of a prismatic flash, scores his vision with a vertical-horizontal sword of dazzle. This is the place at which a child always appears, even if none has been in sight, racing across the field to open the gate for the car. But today the farmer puts on the brake, leaves the engine running and gets out.[1]

This section begins with a disembodied, unattributed phrase, "Pale freckled eggs," which makes the narrative point of view difficult to pinpoint. Yet the next sentence develops as a perfectly standard clause in the third person narrative present, beginning with adverbials of place and time followed by subject, verb and

noun-phrase as complement. One would be tempted to consider that it originates in an outside narrator giving objective information, indisputably labelling a character "the owner of the farm." But this gives rise at once to a contradiction within the first paragraph since the African child equally feels "pride of ownership" as regards the eggs. The text, therefore, in recording the existence of two subjective feelings of ownership, already introduces a conflict that represents a key issue in the novel. The next paragraph imperceptibly slips a little further into the farmer's consciousness. He becomes the focalizer for the scene, and his vision, scored by the Mercedes emblem ("in the shape of a prismatic flash . . . a vertical-horizontal sword of dazzle") is a severing, aggressive vision, brought to bear on surrounding elements ("half-circle," "eggs," "nest") that resist those angular characteristics. Moreover even the designation "the farmer" corresponds to a subjective version that will be considerably qualified by the more objectively sounding beginning of the next section: "Mehring was not a farmer . . . " (22). Yet, the first page of the novel does not read as interior monologue on account of the use of the third person and because the third paragraph begins with "He asks a question . . . ," as if the narrator were standing a little apart, unable to hear the words. The technique comes very close to free indirect style or to what Ann Banfield calls "represented speech and thought,"[2] namely a third person style including marks of orality and subjectivity, as in this short extract: "There is nothing for the farmer to do but follow. Why should he go to look at a dead man near the river? He could just as well telephone the police . . . " (13). In the question clause, one observes an inversion and a question mark, but no inverted commas or embedding formula. The character is presented in the third person but "just as well" recalls what he would say in direct speech. Those oral characteristics recur throughout the section, with the addition of occasional contracted forms, dislocated constructions ("He . . . , this city slicker," [15]) and constant use of unfinished or verbless sentences.

It now appears, retrospectively, that the opening phrase "Pale freckled eggs" must be attributed to Mehring, especially as it is later repeated, then elaborated upon with personal overtones: "A

whole clutch of guinea fowl eggs. Eleven. Soon there will be nothing left. In the country. The continent. The oceans, the sky" (11). Gradually, the narrator's voice can only be detected through an occasional word belonging to a written register ("harbouring," "sycophancy"[12]) or when it gives a translation into English, as for example in the phone-call to the police: "He always talks the white man's other language to officials; he is speaking in Afrikaans. — Listen, Mehring here . . . " (17). But apart from those limited instances a subjective tone prevails, all the more so as the various aspects of the countryside are presented through the mediation of Mehring's five senses. Irony, however, prevents the text from being fundamentally biased in his favour. Thus he is shown to be entirely wrong in his surmises about the Africans semaphoring his presence from the compound, about the calving cow, about the reasons for the pained look on Jacobus's face or for his pleading (12). More indirectly, in taking no heed of the headman's warning signals such as "no" or "but," Mehring reveals himself a prisoner of his ready-made moralizing speech, comically obsessed by the detail of the eggs ("he has in mind just exactly how to put it" [12]), whereas Jacobus has much more important matters to disclose to him. At the end of the section Mehring remains convinced that the problem of the corpse has definitely been dealt with, and, reassured by this "perfect Sunday morning" (19), this "perfect autumn day" (20), he returns to the question of the eggs and of the clearing of the canker weed (20). Thus the first section clearly announces the significant interplay that will develop between the three aspects of temporality: represented thought in the present tense throws into relief Mehring's deliberate investment in farm matters as well as his wilful disregard of the future: "Soon there will be nothing left — No good thinking about it; put a stop to it" (20). As for the past, here it mainly records memories or anteriority, but it will appear from the second section that it equally serves in the episodes when Mehring is cut off from the farm.

> Mehring was not a farmer although there was farming blood somewhere, no doubt. Many well-off city men buy themselves farms at a certain stage in their careers — the losses are deductible from income tax and this fact coincides with something less tan-

> gible it's understood they can now afford to indulge: a hankering to make contact with the land. It seems to be bred of making money in industry.

The first sentence of this second section, as has already been mentioned, forms a marked contrast with the preceding section: "Mehring was not a farmer although there was farming blood somewhere, no doubt." This contrast should not be ascribed solely to the change in verb tense, but also to the narrative style that sets the central character at some distance. Indeed numerous traces of orality ("no doubt," "anyway," "no one would believe") and parentheses such as ("people remarked . . ."), ("they also said"), ("they said") create the impression that this section, echoing conversations about the farm, considers Mehring from another perspective, in his relationship with acquaintances and friends. In other words it functions as a kind of summary, hence the use of the general present and of past tenses are rendered iterative by such later phrases as "every weekend" (second paragraph), "sometimes at weekends" (fourth paragraph), "sometimes . . . on weekdays" (fifth paragraph). Ironically the later developments of the plot show that all the episodes referred to are already outdated. Mehring will become less and less social, visitors from the town will no longer come to the farm (apart from his son, once), and no picnic party will ever be held there. Such episodes will only correspond to endless recollections in Mehring's stream of consciousness. Thus his former mistress Antonia has already left South Africa before the narrative begins, but she is very soon alluded to in relationship to the farm ("someone who was with him . . . " [22]) and afterwards, memories of her continuously break up the surface of his present-tense thought. In addition the past tense appears in all the sections dealing with Mehring away from the farm: a dinner with friends in town (IV), an episode on a plane (XV), the café scene when he meets his friend's daughter (XIX).

The past tense in section XXIV seems at first to be an exception since it presents Mehring driving to the farm. But although this type of immediate situation is elsewhere always conveyed through the narrative present, here the past tense can easily be justified since he cannot reach the farm on account of the flood.

Similarly, Nadine Gordimer resorts to this tense in all the sections showing the Africans or the Indians among themselves (V, VIII, IX, XII, XIV, XVII, XXII, XXIII), including the last one devoted to the burial ceremony in Mehring's absence.

In these sections the authorial voice tends to become very insistent.[3] Undoubtedly, that cannot be avoided when a conversation originally held in an African language is rendered in correct English.[4] Moreover, the tone of assured omniscience is problematic in the long passages dealing with the reconstruction of Indian psychology. Even more annoying are the instances when the text explains the obvious, apparently for the benefit of the naïve implied reader outside South Africa. Thus, in section V, the authorial voice expatiates upon Jacobus's position at a stage when such comment has become quite superfluous: "... half on the side of authority ... he earned his privileges by that authority and also protected *them* against its sources" (33). This voice can similarly intervene in a patronizing, knowledgeable way:

> The baby's hair was reddish, the usual symptom of nutritional deficiency when infants become too old to be satisfied by the breast and are given mealie porridge instead. (37)

Fortunately such glaring examples do not occur very often.

A shift in tense occurs in the last passage quoted. That shift to a general present is a useful starting point for a discussion of Gordimer's use of the present tense in *The Conservationist*. The present tense is used in all its customary ways: direct speech; general truths in the form of interpolated phrases, sentences or longer descriptive passages such as Mehring's experiences of travelling (first paragraph 146) and the presentation of life in the location (84-85).[5] The narrative present — fairly unusual in English — here appears systematically in all the episodes that show Mehring in his relationships with the farm. These build up what can be called the chronological development of the plot: discovery of the corpse (I), fainting fit face downwards (VI), visit of the neighbouring family (VII), assessment of the damage done by the fire (XIII), Sunday with his son Terry (XVI), Christmas day (XX), New Year's Eve alone (XXI), tree-

planting (XXIII), return to the farm after the flood and re-emergence of the body (XXV). Moreover the present tense even occurs in all the passages when Mehring is driving to and from the farm, including the last but one section (XXVI) when, raving about the corpse, he picks up a girl hitch-hiker.[6] After they have stopped in a plantation, and he finds himself faced by a thug or a mine detective, it becomes impossible to decide what actually happens or what belongs to imagination, since reality and phantasm coalesce in a frightening present.

In fact this psychological deterioration has begun much earlier, and a close reading reveals that some other scenes have been entirely imaginary: for instance, the direct speech conversations on the phone with two different persons (220-22) are sheer inventions on his part,[7] as well as the love-making in the farmhouse with Antonia (248) since she never actually entered it. But most of all, the phantasms about the corpse play havoc with Mehring's psyche. Even though he apparently refrained from looking at the body on its second appearance, what Jacobus told him triggers his imagination:

> Whether the old devil really said "nose" or whether the picture of the thing is growing with not being able not to think about it, whether the detail has been added — enough. (251)

In reality Mehring is shown to be fighting against obsessions that began in the first section, as soon as he turned his back on the corpse: "Behind them he is lying alone on his face" (16). In what might be read as factual observation, the adjective "alone" clearly betrays a subjective reaction. This process of identification will be confirmed later by such phrases as "the poor devil" (28) and by the episode of his fainting fit: "the situation . . . seems to be something already inhabited in imagination" (41). From that moment the dead man will never let go of him as the tense-sequence conspicuously reveals here: "As if nothing had ever happened; as if there never has been — is not — someone dead, down there" (42). In consequence Mehring's walks invariably lead him to the third pasture (75), imagining the man "Face downward under the mud somewhere" (79), "blackened," "hardened" (110) after the fire, or devoured by the ants (200). The

presence becomes more and more insistent, concrete, until Mehring hears the man talking to him in direct speech: "Yes, master, the skelms from the location got me, just like the policeman said. Those blacks hit me on the head . . . " (180). Similarly, when the farmer sinks into the mud of the third pasture, he feels first "A soft cold black hand" and then "it's just as if someone has both arms tightly round the leg . . . down there, he's pulled and pulled" (228). The reappearance of the corpse intensifies Mehring's frenzied visions, although he still battles against them. In section XXVI the horrified negation "no, no" recurs more than twenty times, so that this excellent driver, losing his grasp on reality, no longer realizes the meaning of the green light at the intersection.

From now on, all the forces that tend to paralyse him crystallize round the image of the disappeared nose: "Recognized by the shoes and apparently what's left of a face, with the — that's enough!" (249) and "What's left of a face with a — no, no. Let's not hear the story" (250). These obsessions, in each case interrupted by the censor, somewhat blatantly suggest a fear of castration, of impotence, all the more so since they serve as a frame for a long disquisition on his own penis (249-50). In other words, the corpse forcefully represents the return of repressed elements into the present, in conjunction with Mehring's various feelings of guilt. Thus the fear of exposure after the sexual dallying with the girl on the plane ("one immigrant girl in a city full of girls . . . she is there somewhere all the time" [194]) surfaces suddenly with the appearance of his friend's daughter: "it's me: don't you know me?" (194). In the same way the girl hitch-hiker he picks up for the second time ("I knew it was you. I've seen you before," she says [254]), using the same words as Jacobus leading him to the corpse: "Come — she says — Come and look" (257).[8] Eventually he imagines himself being discovered and exposed with that girl, hearing exclamations that directly echo those about the corpse: "Come. Come and look, they're all saying . . . It's Mehring, down there" (265). The identification is thus complete, so much so that early critics believed the last section described Mehring's burial.

A character so persistently haunted by his own past can be expected to have the greatest difficulty in experiencing, and even envisaging, a positive future. For example his original designs concerning Antonia never materialized: the farm had been bought as "a place to bring a woman" (42; 47). But "she never ever came to the house" (69), until she told him, using a past tense: "that was a beautiful place" (104). Similarly Mehring's unconscious repeatedly gives him the lie whenever he thinks he has done with the corpse, while his son brings him no reassurance either. Mehring suspects him of being a homosexual and of wanting to stay in the United States to avoid conscription: "The farm — who else is a farm for, but a son — doesn't interest him . . . " (100), least of all tree-planting (146). Since Mehring has discovered a passion for such an activity, he is forced to fall back on phantasies with Jacobus: "Oh it will be many years before these have any nuts. You and I will be old men, Jacobus — " (224), or to imagine directions given to future guests: "Turn right when you come to the big chestnut trees" (225). But actually these Spanish trees appear doomed from the start. Their roots still carry soil from Europe, whereas the native roots in the pit "don't yield" (226) when he pulls at them, so that in the end "the two small trees . . . stand like branches children have stuck in sand to make a 'garden' that will wither in an hour" (226). Mehring can joke about them in an imagined conversation with Antonia: "I'm planting European chestnuts for the blacks to use as firewood after they've taken over — " (223), but his apparently offhand tone nevertheless betrays his fear of the future.[9] In fact Antonia's warnings ring incessantly in his mind: "No one'll remember where you're buried" recurs five times.[10] He tries to parry them with pieces of wishful thinking, such as his illusory communion with the farm: "He's at one with it as an ancestor at one with his own earth" (161). But ironically, the only part of him to be buried there will be a turd (211), while the deluding vision of himself as an ancestor seems very fragile as opposed to the ten fragments of the Reverend Henry Callaway's *The Religious System of the Amazulu*. Forming a significant counterpoint to the main themes of the novel, they begin with prayers for the sending of harvest and children (39; 61) and, after recording some in-

conclusive actions (83; 93; 113), refer back to the ancestors and the origins (163; 193; 213), describe drought and flood (229) to end on a vision of an uninterrupted line of ancestors and children (247). Each fragment can be read as an ironical cryptic comment on the following section, while the overall sequence suggests an endless cyclical return of abundance and offspring, in a way the last section implicitly denies to Mehring.

Indeed, at that stage, he no longer appears as an active presence, but as a hurried voice on the telephone — hence the use of the past tense for the narrative. Moreover the ritual meeting-point with his friends has dwindled into "that place where the whites once cooked meat" (266). On the contrary the Africans have taken the initiative, so that the text mainly consists of sentences where proper names or groups of people are the subjects of dynamic verbs. The burial ceremony, described with such terms as "properly," "decent," "appointed spot," "perfect harmony," develops as a communal affair including people from the location, some members from the local Zion church and a gift from the Indian shopkeeper.

> There was no child of his present but their children were there to live after him. They had put him away to rest, at last; he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs, one of them. (267)

Thus the appeased tone of the concluding lines unambiguously contrasts with the quasi-childless and rootless Mehring in their serene implication of a future that promises the Africans posterity and legitimate possession of the land.

NOTES

[1] Nadine Gordimer, *The Conservationist* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) 9. Further references are incorporated in the text. The correspondence between the sections and pagination is given in the following chart:

Section	Page	Section	Page	Section	Page
Section I:	9	Section X:	69	Section XIX:	187
II:	22	XI:	84	XX:	194
III:	26	XII:	87	XXI:	202
IV:	30	XIII:	94	XXII:	214
V:	32	XIV:	114	XXIII:	220
VI:	40	XV:	126	XXIV:	232
VII:	48	XVI:	133	XXV:	241
VIII:	62	XVII:	164	XXVI:	248
IX:	66	XVIII:	174	XXVII:	266

[2] Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences* (London: Routledge, 1982).

[3] This is in contradiction with what Nadine Gordimer stated in a recent interview: "Dans *The Conservationist*, le roman est un monologue intérieur, et l'auteur n'apparaît jamais"; revue *Europe*, Paris, n° 708, Avril 1988: 41.

[4] On the contrary, with the Indians, Jacobus speaks the same faulty English he uses with Mehring.

[5] In the following paragraphs the past is used to render a view of the location by two farm children, but the shift in the tenses is not easy to account for (84-5).

[6] The narrative present appears occasionally in *The Late Bourgeois World*, *Burger's Daughter*, *Something Out There*, *A Sport of Nature*; and significantly in the last chapter of *July's People*, J. M. Coetzee uses it in "The Vietnam Project" (*Dusklands*), in *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, so that more generally it might be associated with the new apocalyptic trend in South African fiction.

[7] "The telephone answering device has twice recorded an attempt to reach him through a personal service overseas call" (220). Starting from this, Mehring imagines a conversation with Terry and his mother ("not impossible at this juncture" [220]), and later with Antonia: "it would be crazy to suppose the call might even have been you" (220).

[8] Cf. 13; 245; 246.

[9] Cf. the already quoted phrase: "Soon there will be nothing left" that appears twice very early: 11; 20.

[10] 177; 184; 194 (twice); 250.