

1995

Betrayals of the Body Politic: The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer

Nancy Topping Bazin
Old Dominion University, nancybazin@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs



Part of the [Africana Studies Commons](#), [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#), and the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

Bazin, N. T. (1995). Betrayals of the body politic: The literary commitments of Nadine Gordimer. *Modern Philology*, 92(4), 529-533.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.

Rieke speaks of the poet "wrapping the world in a language of mystery" (p. 96) she again discloses her underlying assumptions that "at the foundation" of nonsense is "the motive of concealment" (p. 3), and that words are vehicles, poems containers, and art a means of transport. The notion of "hidden sense" is yet another version of the archeological fallacy, that the reader can somehow replicate, in an encounter with the text, the condition or circumstance of its initial writing. Such replication is impossible even on the most sanguine of occasions; it assumes not only that the writer has mastery over her material (Rieke talks of Stein's "dominion over words" [p. 91]) but also that the writer has something to say, that the writing is in some way referential, that a paraphrasable content can by some means be neatly separated from the very act of reading and conveyed by other means or in other words to some third party.

"Where have we arrived," Rieke asks in her chapter on Stein, "in terms of the communicative function of language? To say what these lines *mean* is obviously out of the question" (p. 69). Yet on the same page she can say that Stein's work "does not openly ask riddles of its readers, but it persistently places the reader in the role of riddler," thus sidestepping the question, which is an important one. For unconventional syntax is subversive, undermining the reader's and writer's presumed shared sense of what constitutes perceptions and conceptions—undermining, that is, a shared valorizing and validating methodology by means of which narrative, lyric, poem, and the act of reading are constituted in turn.

There is, then, a curious division in this book that I find both very odd and very disturbing. *The Sense of Nonsense* is crammed with fine insights, yet it is overlaid with the inhibitions concomitant with the decoding impulse. The result makes for very interesting reading.

Peter Quartermain
University of British Columbia

Betrayals of the Body Politic: The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer. *Andrew Vogel Ettin*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993. Pp. 150.

Nadine Gordimer, winner of the 1991 Nobel Prize for Literature, is the author of eleven novels, over two hundred short stories, and more than fifty essays. However, she is just beginning to receive the critical attention she deserves. Not until the nineties were the first two collections

of scholarly essays on her works published—Rowland Smith's *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer* (Boston, 1990) and Bruce King's *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer* (New York, 1993). Furthermore, Andrew Vogel Ettin's *Betrayals of the Body Politic* is only the seventh book-length critical study to appear, following upon Julie Newman's *Nadine Gordimer* (New York, 1988) and Stephen R. Clingman's *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (Boston, 1986). Ettin's book is an outstanding addition to this body of criticism.

Nadine Gordimer told an interviewer, "We all write one book, but we write it piece-meal and from very different points of view throughout our lives. . . . For a writer, your work is your life and it's a totality" (quoted on p. 5). Ettin takes this statement as a basis for his thematic approach to Gordimer's work and as a rationale for synthesizing and interrelating material from not only her novels and short stories but also her essays and interviews. His approach is insightful and successful, consistently reflecting the complexity and subtlety that characterizes Gordimer's work; and his graceful, clear style is unspoiled by jargon. These qualities, together with his emphasis on synthesis, make *Betrayals of the Body Politic* a very readable book that provides an excellent overview of Gordimer's work, reliably interpreted. Those looking for a comprehensive reading of a particular novel, however, will find this book slightly less helpful. Although there is usually an extended if far from exhaustive commentary on a particular novel, additional important insights will have to be collected from a variety of pages cited in the index. As Ettin states, "I have not sought to make this book a compilation of individual 'readings' of each major work so much as a reading of the one 'book' on which she has been working throughout her career." Furthermore, although Ettin does not totally ignore Gordimer's chronological development, he focuses on the themes and techniques common to her work as a whole: "I believe her numerous and diverse writings reveal a remarkably coherent body of interests and concerns" (p. 7).

Ettin also argues that "Gordimer has always seen the political as inseparably related to the personal." He plays with the fascinating idea that apartheid merely institutionalizes "the deceptions and abuses of power and trust to which human beings are given even in their private lives." Gordimer's work, he claims, reveals that apartheid "is not an anomaly but a clearly visible manifestation of attitudes and actions common in wider human experience or behavior. Apartheid codifies our oppressive tendencies to separate to segregate, contain, and dominate" (p. 7).

Ettin develops the interesting concept of the writer as "intruder." The writer "pries into and pitilessly pries open; the writer intrudes

upon certain fictions, upon our unspoken, even our unrecognized thoughts, revealing the lies we have grown to take for granted, betraying the patterns and structures to which we have become so accustomed that we no longer notice them" (p. 138). Ettin skillfully describes Gordimer's great talent for unveiling dishonesties—both sexual and political—in human interactions. His recognition of the centrality of this talent is reflected in the title of his book. Revelation, he suggests, is a means of subversion and hence, in a sense, of betrayal. Gordimer reveals the body politic to us "through its effects on how people live and love" and does so in a way that does not just reveal but, more precisely, exposes. "By exposing, by *betraying*, she has both uncovered the political body's secrets and undermined its pretensions" (p. 5). Her literary commitment is to truth, and to tell the truth is to betray, to uncover, to reveal what is—at least, to the best of her ability.

Ettin's reading of Nadine Gordimer's works is sympathetic; he does not deconstruct her ideological assumptions or expose stereotypes in her work, as does South African Kathrin M. Wagner in her *Rereading Nadine Gordimer* (Bloomington, Ind., 1994). Yet in his excellent first chapter, Ettin does analyze Gordimer's rejection of Jewish and female identities and her fervent desire for an African identity. He took full advantage of the publication of *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, which I edited with Marilyn Dallman Seymour (Jackson, Miss., 1990), to synthesize from her interviews material relevant to these topics. Throughout his discussion, while noting her seeming lack of identification with victims of anti-Semitism, he points out Jewish elements that do exist in her works. Also, while not excusing her lack of sensitivity to feminist issues, he places her seeming indifference within her sociopolitical and familial context. Gordimer observed that in South Africa race and class made bonding among women extremely difficult and often impossible; but she did not see this same gulf of race and class as a reason for whites not to participate in anti-apartheid politics. Unlike Virginia Woolf, who grew up in a patriarchal household, Gordimer grew up thinking her mother superior to her father (pp. 28–29); and she found her femaleness a bridge to a new social life rather than a handicap (p. 21). Not sensing a personal need for a feminist perspective, Gordimer could easily conclude that feminism was elitist; she overlooked, for example, the "socioeconomic consciousness" of feminists like Virginia Woolf (p. 19).

After examining in chapter 2 how in her earlier writings Gordimer began to perceive the "connections between private experience and political context" (p. 8) and to clarify her sense of herself as African, Ettin goes on to an enlightening discussion of Gordimer's way of "knowing through the body." Gordimer has declared that "what made me become a writer was, first of all, sensuous experience" (quoted on

p. 60). Gordimer's love of the physicality of dance and dancing "complements her attention to sexuality" (p. 60). Ettin points out the connection Gordimer makes over time between "physical awareness" and "political awareness" (p. 8). Indeed, Gordimer believes "sexual and political vigor go together" (p. 85). However, Ettin rightly concludes that her use of sexuality leaves many ethical and feminist questions unanswered.

Ettin notes interesting sexual imagery at the end of *A Sport of Nature* (and he could have added the image of the helicopter, similarly orgasmic, at the end of *July's People*). In *A Sport of Nature*, at the celebration of the founding of Azania (the liberated South Africa), "cannons ejaculate from the Castle" (quoted on p. 70). Ettin wonders, "Are the final images meant to validate a black African male sexuality that has all the appearance of machismo, in a direct rebuff to emasculating laws and customs constructed to suppress African expression of sexuality and power in South Africa?" (p. 70). Is Gordimer being ironic when she describes the "looting of bars and brothels by some of [the revolutionary General's] long-deprived troops" as they carry out mopping-up operations in "liberated territory" (quoted on p. 70)? Ettin also discusses the sexuality of Gordimer's female protagonists and the relationship of her female characters to political struggle.

Chapters 4 and 5 are entitled "Webs of Falsehood" and "No One Knows." As the titles suggest, Ettin is examining "the importance Gordimer places on exposing the betrayals and treachery by which we negotiate our relations with others" (p. 100). Gordimer stated in an interview, "It's part of living in South Africa, having these incredible layers of concealment, and I suppose I've become more and more conscious of them in relation to other people, and even to myself. . . . What we say and do—well, it's always only half of what we mean, but in South Africa it's less than half" (quoted on p. 100). Ettin pursues these themes primarily in her novels *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People*, her novella "Something Out There," and a number of short stories. Lies and deceptions, violations of trust, occur in the family as well as in politics. *My Son's Story* exemplifies how destructive secrets between family members can be: Will's story is filled with pain, primarily because of a "coloured" father's adulterous relationship with a white woman, a situation enabled and compounded by political secrets.

Ettin also discusses Gordimer's narrative technique, pointing out that truth is different to different people; hence, truths surface only through multiple perspectives and voices. Even then, however, any point of view is a fiction and, hence, unreliable. Ettin suggests that Gordimer's use of multiple voices may be seen as a democratization of the storytelling technique: "multiple perspectives deny the 'privilege'

of the individual vantage point, the liberal humanistic confidence in the subjective rightness of validity of the single consciousness" (p. 47).

Betrayals of the Body Politic: The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer is replete with insights and intriguing perspectives on Gordimer's work. The chapters are structured more by Ettin's association of ideas than by a logical sequence of topics. If you are willing to take a journey with a creative mind engaged in reading Nadine Gordimer's works, you will be delighted with this book.

Nancy Topping Bazin
Old Dominion University

Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature. *Timothy Clark*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Pp. xv+219.

This is an excellent and timely book that gives us the genealogy of Derrida's notion of literature. Literature is not just a genre of discourse or writing but an event or region where philosophy encounters something that cannot be philosophized—that is, something that it cannot contain within its own horizon without being turned away from its self-identity, its self-sufficiency, its self-appointed role as culture's guardian of rationality. Derrida's interest in literature lies precisely in literature's classic refusal of philosophy. This refusal entails, however, a double problem. The first is our inability to say what counts as literature. The second is how to engage any refusal of philosophy from within philosophy itself. Clark's book is concerned with the convergence of these two issues. His genealogy attempts to clarify the question of what literature is for Derrida (and also, what its mode of existence is) by situating Derrida's notion of literature against the background of Martin Heidegger's writings on language and poetry and Maurice Blanchot's radical idea of poetry as ontological exile. In both of these contexts philosophy's self-identity (but of course not just philosophy's) is brought up short as part of the question of the otherness of poetry or writing. But it is not clear that philosophy can understand the sense of the question. It is Clark's attempt to clarify this question, not just for philosophy but also for literary criticism, that makes his book of such critical importance.

Derrida's notion of literature is not a stable concept. Clark wants to stabilize it by reading Derrida back into a number of texts by Heidegger and Blanchot that Derrida has always read with a relentless interest.