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Abstract

Johannes Riis interviewed Nadine Gordimer when she was in Copenhagen in October 1979.

Burger's Daughter seems to be a further culmination of the disillusion, not only with the South African white liberal movement, which is to be found in your writing from around 1960, but also with the efforts made by more radical whites for the liberation of South Africa?

Nadine Gordimer

INTERVIEW

Johannes Riis interviewed Nadine Gordimer when she was in Copenhagen in October 1979.

Burger's Daughter seems to be a further culmination of the disillusion, not only with the South African white liberal movement, which is to be found in your writing from around 1960, but also with the efforts made by more radical whites for the liberation of South Africa?

Don't confuse the views of a large range of characters with the view of the writer... *The Late Bourgeois World* from 1966 shows the breakdown of my belief in the liberal ideals. The main character in that book, Liz, must realize that she can get no farther on the line she has been following; she has got as far as her liberal ideals can get her, and her dilemma is now a new one: shall she turn radical and go on to a more binding commitment, do something really dangerous and give in to the black radical Luke's wish to use her bank account to bring in money for his revolutionary movement — or should she give up her activities completely? The book ends on an ambiguous note: her heart repeating 'like a clock; afraid, alive, afraid, alive, afraid, alive...' And what is going to happen? I wonder. Afterwards it is always interesting to look back upon a book and consider: what will have happened to this or that character. Liz, I think, will have married her lover Humphrey, who is a lawyer, followed his line and worked with him for the liberation of South Africa, but in the 'constitutional way', within the system, using the institutions of the stage. And she will most certainly have gone on not believing in this way.

This book really marks the end of what I had to say about white liberalism in South Africa, and since then I have gone further in social analysis. I think that this breakdown of belief was foreshadowed already in *Occasion for Loving* with its description of an affair between a black

and a white character. That book, however, ended on a note of hope. You see, during the 1950s, we believed very strongly in the personal relationship, in the possibility that in changed circumstances blacks would view us as fellow human beings — *face to face*, acknowledging all of us as individuals: the Forsterian ‘only connect’ lay behind what we did and believed in. But we underestimated the strength of the government, we floated in rarefied air; we did not realize the economic forces we were up against and willy-nilly represented. We were very sincere and well-meaning and naïve, but I still think that whatever the illusions and mistakes were, the attitudes from those years have had an influence, and a positive one, on the attitudes now to be found among both blacks and whites in South Africa. I think that whatever little understanding there is left now between whites and blacks may originate from the liberal era. One should not discount this psychological effect; it cannot be measured, but I am sure it is still there. Of course it is extremely sad and discouraging — if totally inevitable — to see how the blacks have turned particularly against the white liberals in recent years. But let whites remember how much pain and discouragement blacks had to suffer before they faced the necessity to liberate *themselves*. There is a conflict between good intentions and the burden of history. You have to be equal to the demands of your time and place.

Irony has always been an essential element in your narrative technique, and increasingly so. Have you ever considered why?

Really, irony comes to me involuntarily, unconsciously. Proust said (I paraphrase) style is born of the meeting between the writer and his situation. In a society like that of South Africa, where a decent *legal* life is impossible, a society whose very essence is false values and mutual distrust, irony lends itself to you, when you analyse what happens. Let me give an example from ‘The Amateurs’, my short story from *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, which is based very much on a personal experience. I wrote it when I was very young — about 20, I had no theories about literature then.

It is a story about a group of amateur actors and actresses who go out to put on a performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest* for a black audience in a black township. It was based on something that happened to me. I was one of the members of this group. I was going to play Gwendolen and was dressed up in a marvellous dress with a bustle and

false bosom, all of which made me look like an hourglass. I saw myself in the mirror and really felt the cat's whiskers. Here we were, taking culture to the blacks. I had never been in a black township before, it was filthy, ghastly, all of the story's descriptions of the environment are absolutely true to what I saw. I think I suffered a sort of culture shock in my native country: what I saw was so vastly different from the white world I knew, and yet so close in distance a few miles from where I lived. And who were we, feeling superior, showing off European culture in this South African dorp, to an audience with no background for understanding what we were doing, an audience whose own culture *we* did not know at all?

When I wrote the story I was only registering and interpreting what I had actually seen. I used empathy in that story, I intended no irony, it entered on its own. The irony in this story is a by-product of my looking back on the episode, of the process of understanding it, shortly after. But as I said earlier on, irony is an appropriate way of tackling South Africa. Dan Jacobson's *A Dance in the Sun*, which I consider one of the best presentations of the South African tragedy from the white point of view, supports this view.

In your writing, irony seems to become still more pervasive, subtler and subtler, and from time to time this makes it hard for a 'new' reader with no frame of reference to your writing as a whole to grasp the meaning, for there are hardly any fixed points: I have found for example 'Africa Emergent' to be such a story.

It is true that there are more direct statements, explicit comments, and breast beating and less irony in my earliest stories (e.g. in *Face to Face*) than in the later ones. It has to do with the belief I had then in the liberal ideals, but it is just as much due to my lack of writing ability at that time. Had I written say, 'Which New Era Would That Be?' — it dates from my early thirties — earlier on, I would not have let Jake's turning up the gas and kicking the chair in the end of the story, after Jennifer Tetzl and the journalist have left, speak for itself, but would have explained, emotively, Jake's feelings, something like this: 'He was furious, who on earth did she think she was...' and the story would have lost its impact, which comes from the fact that the reader *himself* makes this judgement.

Here I might add that when I make selection of my short stories there is a moral problem. For how much should one revise? In revising, I feel disloyal to myself, it feels like cheating to make corrections and improve-

ments on what one has written a long time ago. So, instead of correcting and editing, I tend to leave out stories that I don't feel are satisfactory for some reason or other.

As to 'Africa Emergent', I don't think it is a very good story, certainly not the best I can do. When I was collecting *Selected Stories* (later re-issued as a paperback as *No Place Like: Selected Stories*) I was very much in doubt whether to include it or not. The problem with this story is that it is really two stories — and what is it about? Is it about the architect, or is it about the relationship between him and his black friend? Actually, it was intended as a story about one of the most terrible products of South African life, the distrust that has arisen, and has had to arise, in a state like South Africa. It was written in a state of fiery emotion. The writer and her situation didn't meet, because she wasn't equal to it. Style tailed...

It is true that in any group of opponents to the government one can never be sure that some of the members are not police spies, and the situation (as in the story) is becoming so absurd and perverted that the very fact that a person — and he may very well be a friend — is *not* in prison, puts him or her under suspicion: Is he or she a police spy? One can never be sure, and of course this places an enormous strain on all relationships. In order to give you an impression of the effects of this state of affairs I'll tell you about an incident from our writers' organization a short while ago.

In the organization — Southern African PEN in Johannesburg — which has both black and white members, we very often arrange poetry readings. Such readings are extremely popular at the moment, we are so to speak at the Yevtushenko stage! One reason for the popularity of this sort of arrangement is that there is a feeling that words which have only been spoken are not felt to be very dangerous, whereas the moment they have been written down they become much more politically incriminating. The quality of the poetry read out is not always very high, some of the poems are hardly more than slogans, but there is genuine feeling, real anger, real pride and determination to create a literature for the people.

One afternoon we had arranged a reading in a black township church. There were about 30 of us, 25 blacks and 4 or 5 whites. The following night, one of the black poets, a young man of less than 20, who had been one of the readers, was called upon by the police, taken to the station, and questioned all night about himself and other members of the organization.

When the rest of us got to know, it caused a great shock among the white members, and we got together in great agitation. Who is the informer? Who is a police spy? Who among us?

But the black members remained perfectly calm. I asked one how he could be so controlled, and got this answer, 'What about it? What can we do if it is found out who the informer is? Absolutely nothing. This is the way we live now.'

The informer was regarded as a victim of a system of repression, just like his victims. There is a feeling among many blacks that you have to accept the facts of the struggle. If you are not prepared or willing to live with danger like that, you can just as well lock yourself up immediately. The risk, the danger is taken so much for granted that incidents like the one I told you about don't surprise or anger any black.

Take the example of the police force. Among blacks there is a tremendous hatred of and antagonism against the white police which is only too natural. But the same hatred is not to be found against their black colleagues. Their work is the same, in fact most work done by the black police is action directed against their fellow blacks. Of course one can understand that blacks become policemen; they get a permanent job, a fixed salary, security. The white economy doesn't give blacks much choice on the matter of earning their bread.

I would like to hear which contemporary writers you read and find interesting?

I know that it is fashionable for writers to say that they don't but I readily admit that I read a lot of contemporary work. I think that Latin American writers such as Alejo Carpentier, García Márquez, Fuentes, Puig and of course Borges, form the most interesting group of writers today. Böll's *Group Portrait with Lady*, Grass's *The Flounder*, Michel Tournier, through whose crystal tower the winds of the world blow, Chinua Achebe...

What about the English?

I think their subject matter is incredibly narrow, most of them concentrate on more or less pathological states. Look at a writer like Iris Murdoch. She is an immensely talented writer, but so often, what is she doing but describing pathological states standing for metaphysical states?

Angus Wilson is a very fine writer, indeed, and of the youngest generation I think Ian McEwan is one of the most promising, not because of his novel *The Cement Garden*, which is mannered and contrived, but because of his short stories. I think he has many fine works in store. Graham Greene is unique — a questing lucidity that no other writer in the English language can come near. Why hasn't he got the Nobel Prize? We have all learned so much from him, as writers and readers.

But most of the interesting news in English literature seems to come from the Commonwealth.

I did not mention any of the so-called Commonwealth writers before. Do you call V. S. Naipaul an English writer? A 'Commonwealth' writer? I don't like Naipaul's *In a Free State* and *Guerrillas* very much, I feel he 'chose' the subjects, whereas with *A House For Mr Biswas* — a marvellous novel — and *A Bend in the River*, his subjects chose him. He expresses a whole consciousness that has not been expressed before. It's tremendously important.

Patrick White I admire greatly, I think he stands apart among present day writers — think of *A Fringe of Leaves* and *The Aunt's Story*. He has a fantastic ear for how people speak; nothing is more deadening than when — in a novel or play — all the characters talk alike. In White's work they never do.

Doris Lessing — always searching, always on her way to something new and different, what a range of intelligence, her every book a blow at artistic complacency. *The Golden Notebook* I consider her masterpiece.

The first part of *Children of Violence*, *Martha Quest*, has some very striking similarities with my first novel, *The Lying Days*, which I wrote at the same time. Not because we influenced each other — I don't suppose we'd heard of each other; the similarities had to arise — there was such a similarity of development and experience between us where and when we grew up. In another sense those early novels complement each other, I like the idea of a literary patchwork, novel by novel, poem by poem, by different writers, mapping out an era, 'a continent' more and more thoroughly. No one writer can do it.

I rank Achebe very highly, especially his *Arrow of God*, and I consider it a tragedy that he has had to live under such disturbed conditions and writes so little.

Among the Americans Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* gives me the strongest illumination of the American mystery. For my personal experience of the USA doesn't explain it to me at all...

Bellow (what a wonderful novel *Humboldt's Gift* is), Updike and Heller started very differently, but their own lives are octopuses taking up more and more space in their books: their divorces etc. Even Updike's *The Coup* which is set among blacks in Africa is a book about John Updike. Clever, erudite, elegant, yes — but just compare it with *A Bend in the River*. Naipaul doesn't use flashy symbolic characters to daggle but commands the profound skill to move deep into the end of colonial life through apparently marginal lives.

What Mailer and Capote etc. are doing now with their writing, in which they use factual material for their books, is in my opinion an unfortunate failure of the imagination: sensationalism in place of sensibility. Again, the morbid hankering after the spurious 'heightened reality' of the pathological personality.

Finally I would like to mention a writer from the American/European borderline, Paul Theroux, whose novel *The Family Arsenal* is one of the best about England of the last 10 or 15 years. Theroux has passed through a remarkable development; he is one of those writers who 'hear' what people are thinking about themselves, and he gives expression to what goes unrealized in their society in a way they can't do.



Nadine Gordimer