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“[S]he Has a Knife in [Her] Hand”: Writing/Cutting in Nadine Gordimer’s Short Stories



This paper focuses on some of the key gestures which give Gordimer’s stories their disruptive power. Across the years and from one grave to another (“Six Feet of the Country”/“The Moment Before the Gun Went Off”), Gordimer’s text both exposes the failures of the symbolic and fends off the threat of the abject. Paying particular attention to the punctuation/punctures of the stories at the strategic point of closure, the article also traces, in the more formally complex stories of *Jump*, the way in which voice becomes the instrument of the dislocation of the narrative.

“Spoils,” the twelfth story in *Jump and Other Stories*, closes on the detailed description of a fascinating scene where the focus is placed on a character who has so far remained off centre: Siza, the black man who serves as a guide to a group of white people on an exclusive safari, has taken them to see the remains of a kill; he suddenly turns away, gets his knife out and dexterously cuts out a small portion of meat for himself whilst leaving most of it behind for the lion, as he takes care to explain when asked why he has restricted himself to such a small piece. In many respects, this scene sums up what Gordimer manages to do within the confines of the short story and what power she draws from the limits it imposes. Pierre Tibi argues that synecdoche is the “mother-figure”¹ of the short story. With each of her stories, Gordimer not only “projects”² the presence of the whole through the part, she relies on fragments and vivid details to carry a meaning which is felt to cut deeper than it may seem at first. As Tibi remarks, synecdoche often gets “entangled”³ with metaphor: here the private reserve can be seen as a microcosm where Gordimer raises the question of who gets what and how the “spoils” are shared on a wider scale – or, as a matter of fact, how they *might* be shared for in that brief episode looms a larger story in which it is *not* the lion who gets “the lion’s share.” But Siza’s efficient technique and the “neatly butchered” piece he cuts out also give the passage a self-reflexive dimension: as a genre capable of turning apparent limitations to an advantage, the short story goes to show that “small is plentiful.”⁴ Gordimer makes a little go a long way, just like the aptly named Siza (a diminutive), whose wisdom stands against the spectre, past or present, of blind and boundless greed.

If Gordimer handles in a particularly skilful manner the art of the fragment, the special power of her stories must nevertheless be sought further. In “Spoils,” our attention is drawn not only to the portion of meat that is carved out but to the deft hand that grips the knife, the object on which all eyes are riveted. Gordimer’s pen shares with the knife – or draws from the knife – something of its trenchant power. In her

1. In “La nouvelle : essai de compréhension d’un genre,” Tibi entitles one of the sections of his essay “La synecdoche ou la figure-mère” (63).

2. “Le paradoxe [de la nouvelle] est ainsi de projeter le tout dont elle est une partie” (Tibi “La nouvelle” 65).

3. “Il est difficile de démêler, à ce niveau, métaphore et synecdoque. C’est souvent que la partie se rattache analogiquement au tout.” (Tibi “La nouvelle” 66)

4. “Pour la nouvelle, qui trouve le moyen de dilater les espaces réduits, ‘small is beautiful’ ou plutôt ‘small is plentiful’” (Tibi “La nouvelle” 69).

hands, the art of the short story comes closer to Poe's "effect"⁵ than to Henry James's "impression"⁶: it must cut the reader to the quick, make its mark in the flesh. If, as Poe insists, every word of a short story is written from the start with the idea of the whole it will form,⁷ Gordimer's stories often seem to shape themselves around a hole. The power of the narrative lies in the break, the shift, the blank which produce discontinuity or interruption – "a disunifying and disruptive" power (Head 163) developed and refined by the modernist short story, as Dominic Head points out. Gordimer shares with Mansfield or Joyce the same urge to tear through the thick veil of discourse and appearances, to find cracks and fissures and pry them open. One may nevertheless recognize something fiercer and blunter in Gordimer's stories which may be connected to the extreme violence – not least the discursive violence – about which she writes. "Six Feet of the Country," first published in 1953 in *The New Yorker* as the walls of apartheid were starting to go up, stands as highly emblematic. The grave that was meant to receive a body will remain empty as the deceased black migrant worker claimed by his family has been mislaid and lost by the authorities after the autopsy of the corpse: the story lays bare the abject fate to which the body has been abandoned while building a symbolic space for it. The cuts Gordimer makes – and that is particularly obvious at the closure of the stories – open or widen gaps rather than bringing resolution, or, equally often, they stop the story short by pulling a veil over what remains entirely unresolved – yet another form of violent interruption. Punctuation then reflects the ambivalence that Barthes develops around his *punctum*, both a mark and a puncture/hole/wound,⁸ both an eyecatcher and a blind spot, both piercingly significant and resistant to signification. Cuts and gaps tend to grow over the years with what Graham Riach describes as Gordimer's "late style" (Riach 2016), but they also result from a wider variety of disruptive gestures. In some of the more formally complex stories, it is in the profound instability and dis-location of voice that we can find one of the most powerful expressions of a world out of joint.

Cutting out a space for the body

Most of the time, Gordimer's short stories offer us a "slice of life" which opens perspectives far beyond the spatial and temporal confines in which the narrative chooses to dwell. As is often the case in the short story, the focus comes to bear on transitional moments: departures, journeys, encounters, separations – punctual events which put into relief what remains otherwise hidden, and set astir the imaginary veil which wraps each of her characters in his/her own limited reality. Gordimer's relentless energy at disclosing the fracture of her country often expresses itself through the need to expose not simply "illusions" but the insidious power of an invisible imaginary framework –

5. Poe insists on the "unity of effect" of the "short narrative in prose." Henri Justin comments on Baudelaire's hesitations as to the translation of Poe's "effect" and suggests that something crucial gets lost when the French poet finally opts for "impression": "Le texte est défini par la force psychique qu'il exerce sur le lecteur" (Justin 123).

6. James distinguishes two effects attainable by the rigour of brevity: "The one with which we are most familiar is that of the detached incident, single and sharp, as clear as a pistol-shot; the other of rare performance is that of the impression [...]" (*The Fortnightly Review*, April 1898, quoted by Shaw 47).

7. "In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to be the one preestablished design." (Review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, *Selected Writings*, 443) This emphasis on the "whole" did not prevent Poe, of course, from building his own holes into his tales.

8. "[...] *punctum* c'est aussi: piqûre, petit trou, petite tache, petite coupure – et aussi coup de dés. Le *punctum* d'une photo, c'est ce hasard qui, en elle, me point (mais aussi me meurtrit, me poigne)" (Barthes 49).

even, or especially, in those who show an “open mind” and are possessed of the best intentions. In *Jump*, Gordimer shows that she can go for the fast blow, a sudden turn of events that shatters everything: the bomb that explodes in “Some Are Born to Sweet Delight” leaves the reader hanging in mid-air, tears a hole that will never be filled in the fabric of the story that the narrator had patiently woven. But the pacing of the stories varies. In “Six Feet of the Country” Gordimer drills holes into the dream of owning a farm – a quintessential South African dream. The body whose fate falls to the white male narrator is not a missile that suddenly blows to bits his ordered life but a burden (an ironic displacement of the “white man’s burden”) he does not know how to carry, a corpse that can neither be retrieved nor got rid of. Each story, in its own way, justifies Dominic Head’s reservations about Stephen Clingman’s claim that “disruptive elements are less marked in [Gordimer’s] shorter fiction than it is in the novels” (Head 163). As Head points out, “Clingman reproduces an aesthetic of the short story – based on notions of its unity or aesthetic perfection – commonly found in short story criticism” (163). “Six Feet of the Country” is not just an embryo of *The Conservationist*, it stands very much on its own, conveying with great sharpness the allegorical dimension of a haunting remainder – the shard that stands for the whole is also the shard that makes a gash in the whole.

Short of being fully in a position to convey the reality of black and coloured South Africans, Gordimer mainly works at undermining the (un)reality in which the white minority is steeped. The first sentence of “Six Feet of the Country” emphasizes that disconnection through a chiasmus and a polyptoton which immediately foreground the question of the “real”: “My wife and I are not real farmers – not even Lericé, really” (19). In fact, the apparent awareness shown by the narrator turns out to have little substance as a few lines further down he rejoices in being far away from “the imitation-stone bird bath of the suburbs” (19) to enjoy what sounds very much like the real thing... until a real body gets in the way. The theme of theatricality pervades the text (Lericé is a former actress) as it does in “Spoils,” where years later the rich are still shown to be at play in their so-called “game reserve,” each sticking to his/her part including the narrator, who describes himself as “the clown [...], the charmer, the wit” (163) in the “ceremony of the evening meal” (164). It is against the backdrop of this “parody of old colonial times” (164) that the irruption of the body or the sight of flesh and blood is to be read. “Unreal” says “the wife” in “Spoils”; “No. Real. *Real*” thinks the narrator (173). Gordimer’s stories oppose airy words to the solid materiality of the body, to bodily needs, body fluids and body smells. But she also opposes a body that can be accommodated or domesticated to an excessive body, a body which is “*Real*” in the Lacanian sense in that it resists symbolic and imaginary appropriation.

The encounter with that other reality has the effect of turning the secure world in which many of Gordimer’s characters take refuge into something thin and hollow: at the end of “Comrades,” the expensively decorated house with its chandelier and carved lion becomes an eerie, fantastic place in the eyes of one of the three hungry youngsters whose final reflection closes the story: “Only the food that fed their hunger was real” (96). At the beginning of “The Bridegroom,” it is not a sculpture that is proudly displayed but a photograph which just about sums up what “the bridegroom” knows about his future wife, a “smiling girl [...] like one of those faces cut out of a magazine” (171). It is for the girl in the picture that the character is about to cast aside Peet (the

servant who acts almost like a mother, almost like a lover) and leave the camp, its people and its music in order to shut himself up in a caravan. But the failure to see what one sacrifices has greater consequences sometimes, not least for those on the other side of the camp. In “Six Feet of the Country,” the very real body that the narrator fails to restore to its proper place does not only provide an ironic counterpoint to the hollow lie in which the mock farmer lives. The hole in the ground marks a gap in the symbolic at the most basic level. The narrator who poses as feudal lord and fatherly figure does not only pathetically flounder in his dealings with the authorities who have simply lost trace of the body. He fails to recognize why this matters so much, why his black workers should be prepared to spend their last savings to retrieve a dead body. Denied, even in death (the one thing that eventually makes everyone equal) its singularity and integrity, the nameless boy who had fled Rhodesia is finally doomed to the abjection of a common grave. The hole dug in the ground which remains empty, “six feet of the country,” marks the place of a void that Gordimer chooses not to fill but which can, at the level of the narrative, work as a place of symbolic inscription and mourning.

In many respects, Gordimer’s repeated acts of tearing at the fictions people live by leaves us with two very different pictures depending on what side of the grave one decides to look at, as is underlined in a story like “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off.” But more often than not, the rejection/dejection/abjection to which one side condemns the other contaminates those who thought they were apart or did not have any part in the process of exclusion. Destruction becomes self-destruction: the “accident” by which Van der Vyver puts a bullet into his own son is no longer just an accident when one considers the crime that was committed long ago. The failure to recognize one’s own flesh and blood leads Van der Vyver to accept a partition through which he believes that he can share something (“a moment of high excitement shared through the roof of a cab,” 116) when that barrier conceals the path of the bullet that it nevertheless lets through. But it is as though the bullet had bounced back: the farmer ends up “soaked” in the blood of the “boy” he failed to call his “son,” just as later at the police station he is seen “sobbing, snot running onto his hands like a dirty kid” (113). Whether they refuse to call things by their names or remain fathers in name only (another instance of which is to be found in “A Journey”), fathers repeatedly fail, effecting a dissociation of the real and the symbolic instead of enabling their connection.⁹ The recurrent motif of fathers destroying their own flesh finds one of its most unbearable expressions in “Once Upon A Time” where a child ends up mauled by the “dragon’s teeth” that his own parents have erected all around their house. The torn flesh of the child offers a powerful image of the morbid state of a country, where until something new can be born,¹⁰ death strikes what has barely time to see the light of day.

In its own way “Spoils” can be considered as representing the ultimate stage of the situation of abjection which is already powerfully conveyed in “Six Feet of the Country”:

9. On the whole, if Gordimer’s white male characters tend to be failing or lacking in many respects, it is not so much their psychological shortcomings which are at stake here, but a lack at the level of what Lacan calls the Paternal function or the Paternal Metaphor which is supposed to connect the Symbolic and the Real – at the cost of a loss that must be conceded.

10. I am alluding to the epigraph of *July’s People*, “The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms,” a quote from Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*.

In the warmth of the bed your own fart brings to your nostrils the smell of rotting flesh: the lamb chops you devoured last night. Seasoned with rosemary and with an undertaker’s paper frill on the severed rib-bones. Another corpse digested. (161)

One might argue that the “corpse” is in this case only the flesh of an animal, but the allusion to the “undertaker’s frill” and the list of news items that follows emphasize the idea that the narrator is not just talking about the meat daily placed on his table but about the daily fare of TV and newspapers, human bodies with which one is fed every day and whose death one has learned to “digest” without thinking about it. Things are closing in: the inability to give the body a decent burial has turned into a general necrophagia, and those who think they are bathing in “amniotic fluid” in the perfect swimming-pool might not realise that what is “at their own body temperature” (174) is the putrid smell which the focalizer now detects everywhere. In front of these children (babies?) at play in their game reserve, Siza’s final gesture proves particularly meaningful: the knife fulfils a practical purpose – that of cutting the piece of meat with which the father will feed his family – but it is also the instrument of an unwritten law (about how things might/should be shared) which does not simply give the cutting power of the knife a symbolic value but, more fundamentally, restores the value of the symbolic.

Rita Barnard points out that one may find in Siza “disquietingly familiar traits: the features of the old colonial type of ‘the guide who really knows Africa’” (131), something rather comforting for the little group. Yet the cliché is somewhat upset by what everyone has recognized earlier:

He has a knife in his hand and the white man who has just joined the group recognizes it, it is the knife that is everywhere, nowhere without the knife, on the news, at the dark street-corners, under the light the warders never turn out. (178)

With the raw facts that Gordimer introduces at regular intervals in her stories, the author does not simply consolidate a background of which we never lose sight, she renews the fabric of her text in a manner which distinguishes her fiction from that of her modernist forebears without being ascribable to a straightforward realism. Whether or not we decide to consider this feature as characteristically postmodernist, it introduces a heterogeneous element which points to the presence of something very real outside fiction despite the fact that it is always mediated, and heavily so. The symbolic can, and must, be restored but without losing sight of what it renounces or sacrifices.

Cutting points: tearing the curtain/drawing the curtain

It is generally acknowledged that the dynamics of the short story rests largely on what happens in its last lines. Unsurprisingly, it is an ideal strategic point at which Gordimer can display her cutting skills. The strength of much of Gordimer’s fiction lies in the subtlety and complexity of the characters, narrators, and situations she builds: in other words, things are rarely clear-cut in the world she depicts. Even when she opens a story with a name like Marais Van der Vyver, which brings to mind uncomfortable associations (with Eugène Terre’Blanche for example), she decides to project in the midst of a stereotypical and extreme picture of white resistance the figure of a man torn by conflicting feelings that he cannot fully acknowledge. Alienated, out of place, or stuck in an uncertain in-between, many of her characters nevertheless end up having to make choices – or, more often, having these choices made for them. Having explored a zone

of contradiction, ambiguity or indeterminacy, a number of Gordimer's stories draw their power from the trenchant manner in which the issue gets decided. The brutality of the story does not then lie so much in the gap that opens but in the gap that closes again as if nothing had happened.

In many cases, as in "Town and Country Lovers," the brutal ending reflects the brutality of a law and its officers who break into houses and tear couples apart when they are not of the same skin colour – unless this law has been internalised and splits individuals in two: in the second part of this story which forms a diptych, a father ends up killing with his own hands the illegitimate child he had with Thebedi, the only girl with whom he seems to have ever found a true connection. In each case, the ending puts an end to a relationship formed despite the barriers erected by the law, but, as often, the worm is in the apple: the relationship is shown to be marred in the first place by the irresponsibility of the two white men who get involved with, respectively, a coloured and a black girl. If the Austrian geologist of the first story seems far less encumbered by cultural and political determinations than the son of a typical white South African farmer, his detachment in this convenient relationship turns out in the end to be almost as chilling as the crime committed in the second story. The geologist's superficial involvement¹¹ is finally presented as being not so different from the rape which is committed under the umbrella of the law when the young coloured woman is forced to undergo a medical examination: "[The district surgeon] put into her where the other had made his way so warmly a cold hard instrument that expanded wider and wider" (277).

The tension between the ambiguous situations Gordimer's narratives build and the straightforward outcomes that they sometimes reach can be read in various ways: nuances and intricacies may have to be treated as irrelevant when considering the crude racial divide which is at the heart of every story. In this case this leads the narrator to sacrifice his/her characters and feed them to the press: the end of each part of the diptych cuts to newspaper reports of the trials which have the brutal effect of exposing the characters like criminals (the only criminal remaining in fact shielded behind "his mother's raincoat"); at the same time the narrative suddenly erects a screen which cuts us off from the characters we have just read about and pushes the story out of the picture:

Interviewed by the Sunday papers, who spelled her name in a variety of ways, the black girl, speaking in her own language, was quoted beneath her photograph: "It was a thing of our childhood, we don't see each other any more." (286)

This is the art of cutting a long story short: Gordimer's piece, like Siza's piece, gets "neatly butchered," like the name of the black girl. Whether Thebedi expresses her true feelings or not, the episode is closed and the curtain drawn.

If dismissal can be read as a sign of resilience (marked earlier in the case of Thebedi by her marriage to Njabulo), the return to normality proves sometimes more harrowing. At the end of "Six Feet of the Country," it is the father of the young man whose body has not been retrieved who is dismissed by the narrator and his wife: "The old man from Rhodesia was about Lerice's father's size, so she gave him one of her father's old

11. Despite his profession, the man avoids delving deep into the various countries to which his work leads him: "[...] year after year the experience of this work enfolds him, swaddling him away from the landscapes, the cities and the people, wherever he lives" (267). The story already plays on the tension between the horizontal and the vertical that Stephen Clingman explores in *Jump*, but there is no room for the *Unheimlich* here, the man in question being too safely "swaddled."

suits, and he went back home rather better off, for the winter, than he had come” (31). Just before this final twist, it had seemed that the narrator was to pay a dearer price for his inability to sort out the swap of corpses: the narrator’s remark that his wife and Petrus, their black servant, “looked exactly alike” as they “kept their eyes turned on” him suggests Lericé’s definitive estrangement from her husband and a swapping of sides.¹² The very end makes this shift less clear as husband and wife seem to agree on what is not just a swap but yet another “swindle,” the very thing against which the narrator purported to act (“Why should they get away with a swindle?” 30). The “suit” carries an echo of the response first given by the health authorities: “the body had been suitably disposed of” (24); on top of it the swindle gets conveniently covered up or dressed up by what may pass for an act of kindness.

The sudden interruptions or blunt conclusions which close many a story draw their power from the way in which they wrap up the narrative but also from what they leave out. The art of cutting in Gordimer’s fiction can be seen to conform to the art of omission championed by Hemingway. In this particular case, leaving something out means also refraining from writing the story one can only conjure up from the other side: the end of “Six Feet of the Country” marks the beginning of the story that remains to be written, that of Petrus and Petrus’s brother and Petrus’s father. The same applies to almost all the stories involving black or coloured characters: the blank they refrain from filling allows that story to exist somewhere, in the wake of the text. Gordimer stops on a threshold even when dealing with the side she feels she knows a bit better. The end of “Jump,” “Not now; not yet” (20) which leaves the reader poised on the edge of a window is a case in point: by deferring the jump, the text displaces the emphasis from an action with which the character is familiar to an abyss which remains gaping.¹³

The art of omission invites us to pay close attention to the image used by Gordimer to describe the ability of the short story to capture something the novel cannot convey: “the quality of human life, where contact is more like the flash of fireflies, in and out, now here, now there, in darkness” (Gordimer, “Flash of Fireflies” 264). One may feel that the darkness does not simply lie around but within: shadows and blind spots appear even where Gordimer directs “the light of the flash.” The cut-off point of the story heightens the power of the half-said, of the simultaneous combination of revelation and obfuscation. The last word of “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off,” “son,” literally sheds light on a number of elements we have read so far but also suddenly introduces a wide shadowy area, a place into which the reader will never go. We get an interesting variation of what Pierre Tibi calls an epiphany with a double trigger (“*une épiphanie à double détente*”)¹⁴: the “crime,” which we are prepared to believe

12. Dominic Head, among others, reads the story in that manner: “A crucial aspect of this ending is the clearly implied distinction between the narrator and his wife: her interest in the matter suggests a compassion which is at one with her apparent affinity with Petrus, whereas the narrator’s dogged engagement with the authorities is no more than a matter of principle. The isolation of the narrator’s perspective parallels the physical isolation indicated by his physical estrangement from his wife” (Head 173). In that respect one may underline a striking shift in the last scene which starts with “She and Petrus” (the narrator is facing the pair), an ironic echo of the very beginning of the story “My wife and I.”

13. In an article entitled “The Politics of the Couple in Nadine Gordimer’s *Jump and Other Stories*” Nicolas Boileau suggests a fascinating parallel between the story “Jump” and *Lord Jim*: “Analysed as a reference to Beckett and Shakespeare (Riach 1085), and I would add to Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, which is also about an enigmatic jump, this story interrogates the limits of telling [...]” (Boileau 59-60). We can also find very powerful echoes of *Heart of Darkness* in the story, and, more generally, a strong connection with Conradian aesthetics as a whole.

14. Tibi comments: “[...] l’épiphanie dite à double détente se décompose en deux épiphanies successives dont la seconde confirme, nuance, complète ou problématise la précédente. La première rebondit, fait ricochet, se dédouble

was not a crime, conceals another “crime” of sorts of which not a word will be said. However blunt, the conclusion raises complexities that linger beyond the close of the story, beyond the last word which works like a quilting point yet tightens a knot of contradictory feelings – an instance of what Dominic Head calls the “productive” or “resonant” ambiguity (165) of Gordimer’s stories.

What is hushed, hidden or obscured is often simply displaced, as can be seen at the end of “Keeping Fit,” where the emotional shock the character has been through both reveals and conceals itself in the “fit” he has, when exposed to the desperate cry of a bird trapped in a pipe. This very Mansfieldian ending insists on the failure on the part of the character to recognise what has just happened to him and his need to blot things out. But the reader is also left to hear in that lonely and helpless cry something which the man cannot have experienced in his very brief excursion to the other side, something which lies beyond the curtain. “No room for sorrow” (58), a phrase describing the “drunken joy of the gypsies” in “My Father Leaves Home,” may be said to characterise Gordimer’s fiction as a whole. The sense of feelings heavily contained can be found at the end of the last story in *Jump*, “Amnesty,” where the puzzling vision of the rat emerges from “a bar of grey, not enough to make rain,” potentially an image of tears that cannot be shed. Even in “Once Upon A Time,” where ambiguity has been ruled out to make room for a perfectly cruel tale, the last character to appear is the “weeping gardener,” a puzzling detail which works like a *punctum* in the general picture. Unlike “trusted” in “the trusted housemaid,” “weeping” does not work like a fixed epithet so that the weeper seems to stand apart from the stock characters of the mock fairy tale. There might be after all a place for tears and mourning, beside the clear “warning” to those who still believe in fairy tales in a country like South Africa. For is there anything sadder than to accept that a child can no longer read a tale for children or will do so at his own peril? That story, the black gardener certainly knows better than anyone else.

Widening the gap: from dissonance to dislocation

Holes and gaps can be considered to widen in Gordimer’s later texts; they also result from a growing variety of gestures that rend the unity of the text. The temporal fabric, which is mostly linear in the first stories, becomes more and more discontinuous over time but it is also in terms of voice and focalization that the homogeneity of the text gets severely undermined.

From very early on, Gordimer has excelled in producing intense moments of dissonance in her stories through a biting irony. While resorting to a large extent to dramatic or tragic irony, Gordimer also uses her incisive skills to insert now and then an incredibly direct line that will sting the reader. In “Town and Country Lovers,” Dr Franz-Joseph von Leinsdorf appears from the first as rather distant and withdrawn, but delicate and refined – hence the shocking effect of his description of the cashier-girl who is to become his companion and lover: “She was rather small and finely made, for one of them. The coat was skimpy but no big backside jutted” (269). In “The Bridegroom,” Gordimer selects the moment when the two camps (that of the white overseer and that

[...]” (Tibi “Pour une poétique de l’épiphanie,” 225). Here the power of the ending lies in the fact that one short word condenses the two revelations whilst keeping them separate, the idea of a “crime” committed long ago “problematizing” the second “crime.”

of the black workers) seem to have merged (“they were sitting close in at the fire now,” 178) to wreck the sense of harmony the music had introduced. It is at the moment when “the bridegroom,” carried away by an enthusiastic and generous impulse, offers to share his own music that he flounders in the most pathetic and embarrassing way: “‘Next week’ – the young man raised his voice gaily – ‘next week when I come back, I bring radio with me, plenty real music. All the big white bands play over it—’” (178). The long dash does not simply mark a pause in the narrative: the character suddenly stops because he knows there will be no “next week” around the camp fire; he might also be vaguely aware of the violent rift he has suddenly introduced. Whether he is or not, the effect on the reader is the same: the dash is the limit against which the feeling of something shared gets shattered in a territorial reassertion (“white bands,” “real music”) but also in a parody of the parody of a white man speaking his own language in the way he thinks a black man does.

Irony is thus often introduced through a process of self-exposure which makes the reader wince or sometimes writhe with embarrassment. The shaming moment takes place sometimes closer to home, as can be seen in “Comrades,” where the well-meaning hostess, a distant double of Gordimer herself, digs herself into a hole when she draws attention to her “carved lion.” Once again Gordimer tracks the blunder, the impulse that leads one to bare one’s defences, accuse or humiliate oneself. The moment of dissonance is a moment of deep resonance: “the foolish remark” brings the attention to bear on an object which gives the obstacle that separates the hostess from the “comrades” a heavy material presence. The woman suddenly becomes as grotesque as the lion which she calls hers (“How d’you like my lion?” 96). In this case, the embarrassment is only alleviated by a sudden shift of focalization which makes the hostess and her lion simply irrelevant. As the narrator cuts to the point of view of one of the comrades, the “impact” (96) of the whole place seems neutralized; the only thing that matters and that has any reality, the only thing *they* can call theirs, is “their” hunger. After the white woman’s self-sabotage, the only thing that can save the story and turn “the foolish interruption” into “revelation” (96) is to wipe her out as the consciousness that can carry the narrative.

It is this process of erasure, together with the multiple shifts of points of view, which makes a story like “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off” a perfect example of the attempt not just to describe the gulf that divides the country but also the sense of things being out of joint. Apart from the dramatic irony at work in the story, one can hear now and then the bite of a recognizable voice making itself heard “silently” through free indirect speech in order to expose an all too familiar racist discourse: “[...] blacks can sit and drink in white hotels, now the Immorality Act has gone, blacks can sleep with whites... It’s not even a crime any more” (114). But irony has become local: we no longer get the impression that we can rely on a vantage point from which to embrace the whole narrative. The reader seems to have been deliberately challenged to identify the point of view or the voice that shifts sometimes within the same sentence. If we assume that we are following the roving eye of a single omniscient narrator, that eye is literally all over the place, while the voice keeps shifting, disconcertingly, between a factual approach and highly subjective and offensive comments. An example of this can be found in the scene at the graveyard where the narrator adopts a detached and speculative attitude which suggests the choice of external focalisation (“It is obvious

from the quality and fittings of the coffin [...]”; “a woman who can’t be more than in her late thirties [...]”¹⁵ but then inserts into the description tendentious comments such as “The young wife is pregnant (of course)” (115). The reader may have to overcome his disbelief and accept that the whole narrative has been entrusted to an invisible narrator who is deeply biased (and not just echoing the prejudices of some of the characters) despite the regular return to what poses as a mere exposition of the facts. The “moment” which gives the story its title introduces yet another complexity. As the anadiplosis that spans the blank between the penultimate and final sections shows, that moment is both connected to the rest of the story and severed from it, separate in the narrative economy of the text. Although the focalisation is clear (an internal focalisation on Van der Vyver), the voice that carries the tragic moment suddenly seems to have been neutralised. The droning voice of self-victimization does reappear in the final paragraph but it is as if that voice had been hushed for a while. Somehow we hear that hush: the moment draws its intensity from its contents (carefree laughter followed by sudden death; a man covered in what he sees for the time as his own blood) but also from its suspended quality. The fantasy of rewinding time and freezing the moment “before” may belong to the character; but the desire to accommodate that moment “without explanation” (116) could respond to a need on the part of the implied author, tired of her own words, to suspend both the ruthless logic she has set into motion and the discourse that surrounds it. “No room for sorrow” however: the moment can only exist thanks to the gesture which consists in cutting it off from the rest of the narrative to make it float in a kind of impossible nowhere.

Together with the growing disorientation it generates, the problematic inscription of voice points to the difficulty of providing a third space from which to rise above a fracture which has become more and more acute. The schizophrenia embodied by Van der Vyver makes room in “Jump” for what amounts to an erasure of identity after a changing of sides. Here again, Gordimer cuts off the moorings of the voice carrying the narrative but to a different effect: the disappearance of an authoritative voice no longer comes from a multiplication of voices but from a reduction to a voice alone with itself.¹⁶ “He” is both inside and outside, “behind the door” and following the travelling eye along the corridor by which “he is finally reached within” (3). “He” is both the “dim ballooned vision of a face” on “the silvery convex of the TV screen” and the man “looking up” “on the dead screen” (4) – although he cannot be gazed at and gazing at exactly at the same time.¹⁷ “He” is a series of endless reflections, faced with the impossibility of coinciding with “himself” and yet who can’t be anyone but “Himself.” “He” “is an echo in the chamber of what was once the hotel” (3). Time has become a perpetually dark room, a cave to which he has been exiled and in which, like Echo herself, he is undergoing a slow process of petrification. We realise that his story is the repetition of a story that has been repeated many times before – in endless interviews, interrogations, confessions – like the tape that is being played over and over again and that conjures up the image of a soldier that could be himself. It is also story *as repetition*.

15. “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off,” 115 and 116. My emphasis.

16. Although the story presents itself as a third-person narrative, the focalisation is entirely internal and allows for no other point of view but that of a single character. It thus comes as no surprise when the narrative spontaneously turns into monologue.

17. A point which Derrida develops at length in his reflections on the spectral and time “out of joint” in *Specters of Marx*.

As Graham Riach points out, it is difficult not to think of Beckett and *Krapp’s Last Tape* in this “temporal shuttling between past and present, leading to a sense of interminable stasis” (Riach 1083). But if the image that comes to mind is that of a Möbius strip, as Riach suggests, it is not exactly that because “forward progress is at once a return to the point of origin” (1084). A Möbius strip does not have a beginning or an end and this is the nightmare from which the character can no longer awaken. The end suggests that nothing and no one can cut that strip. What turns out to be meaningful is the absence of a determination that might have grounded the word “jump,” which can be read as a noun or a verb, a truncated infinitive or an imperative form. Beyond a shift of meaning characteristic of Gordimer’s fiction, as Karen Lazar rightly points out,¹⁸ we get the sense that “jump” now floats in the same void as that which the character inhabits.

A tale does unwind little by little in “Jump” but that does not counter the feeling of repetition as temporal landmarks get blurred and we can’t be sure at any one moment which umpteenth time the tale has reached in its endless loop. Just like in “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off,” matter resists form. As they both diverge and overlap, the separate paragraphs that make up the text in each of these stories do not simply produce a jumbled temporal order but appear like a repeated attempt to get closer to a story that cannot be told in full – an extension of the “stuttering” (1085) Riach hears in the “telling, telling-telling” of “Jump” (14). At this late stage, the story has become a provisional construct, a tale in the making. As they foreground their lacunary nature, both short stories can be considered to reflect the state of disintegration of the country in the last years of the apartheid, adding a stone to, or rather boring yet another hole into, a literary edifice which could be compared to a termitary in the story of the same name.¹⁹ But this act of dismantling appears more and more clearly as the ethical response to the state of the country rather than its mere allegorical representation. The description of the hollow ground full of tunnels and passages on which the house of the narrator of “Once Upon a Time” is built reminds us of the fragile ground on which her solid house was once erected. It also prefigures her intention of grabbing not so much a knife as a pickaxe in the fairy tale she eventually concedes to write. At the same time, by duplicating the act of mining and undermining, the author still performs an act of remembrance and not just a dismemberment: she builds a space for a haunting past – “six feet of the country” for the “Chopi and Tsonga migrant miners” (24) who worked and sang and died down below.

The journalistic and the poetic

The “rents and fissures” that Gordimer builds into her texts or the “ravaged character” of her late style (to quote Riach quoting Adorno, 1077) take on multiple forms which include self-reflexivity. A story like “Once Upon a Time” suggests that metafiction in Gordimer’s hands is not just about showing the seams of the story, but bringing out a tension which can put the narrative at war with itself. The author *will* write her fairy tale after all, but not without putting up a major act of resistance. It is also striking that as she brings us closer and closer to a raw reality, Gordimer should multiply layers of

18. “Gordimer’s stories almost always involve a radical shift in power relations of some kind [...]. The trajectory of a mere word in a story may often be enough to signal such a shift: as in the case of *jump* which signifies domination yielding to self-disgust” (Lazar 787).

19. “The Termitary” was published in 1980 in *A Soldier’s Embrace*.

texts and screens, in Conradian fashion, or in more contemporary style by inviting into her text newspaper or TV. While they insistently conjure up the realm of facts, it would be inaccurate to say that these insertions highlight an unproblematic realistic agenda as they are often presented as potential for further or alternative distortions. What is undeniable is the disturbance they introduce or the clash they provoke: the journalistic often appears as the instrument of transgression, like the metaleptical inclusion of an author who could be called Nadine Gordimer in some of the stories. Cutting through barriers, Gordimer raises the question of the continuity and discontinuity between different orders of narration and representation. What matters once again is the gap she opens. This constitutes an interesting development of what, according to Valerie Shaw, is a seminal aspect of the short story, *i.e.* the association of “the journalistic and the poetic”:

The poetic and the journalistic are usually taken to be opposed, not complementary, terms, but [...] the short story has a marked ability to bring apparent extremes of style together, mingling self-conscious literary devices and colloquial spontaneity within the “essentially poetic” compression of single narrative. (Shaw 6-7)

Gordimer does not simply combine or “mingle” the journalistic and the poetic: while the journalistic may be used to break the continuity of the narrative and strip the illusion into which the text may lull us, we may argue that the poetic possesses its own disruptive power as it cuts through discourse with sharp images that challenge the stability and univocity of meaning. The end of “Spoils” also offers us a good example of how the metafictional itself, sometimes borrowing the form of discursive interruption, can gain some edge through the use of powerful images which in their turn silence discourse. As the instruments of a “productive ambiguity,” poetry and allegory assert their own subversive potential, prying open and keeping open the gap between signifier and signified. What have a few “leaves” in common with the verb “Leaves” in the title “My Father Leaves Home”? The end of the story, which strings together a long succession of negative sentences, foregrounds a hiatus: there is no way of retrieving the story of the father “leaving” home (“This village is not my father’s village”) and it is “not out of any sentiment,” we are told emphatically, that the narrator has collected “six leaves from [her] father’s country.” Despite the lack of correspondence between present and past, something unexpected has nevertheless been experienced in the wood, a fear that knows no boundaries and connects various pictures in the narrator’s mind. Of that collage – a landscape of fear with “the hurt and hate it brings” (66) – the “leaves,” across time and space, do bear some trace.

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