Gordimer, Interrupted

Stephen Clingman

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/418>

DOI: 10.4000/ces.418

ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 10 June 2019

Number of pages: 11-23

ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Stephen Clingman, "Gordimer, Interrupted", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 41.2 | 2019, Online since 05 November 2019, connection on 16 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/418> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.418>

Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Gordimer, Interrupted*

Recent critical attention has turned to questions of form, genre, and style in Nadine Gordimer's fiction, and particularly to the disrupted or disruptive features of her work, not least in her later short stories. This essay approaches the idea of interruption as not only consistent in Gordimer's fiction all along, but as one that can be read as a kind of signature in her novels and short stories alike. Whether concerning content, form or style, Gordimer writes under the sign of interruption, in a way that develops and transforms through time.

"[A]nd then something burst in his eyes, some wet flower covered them, and he thought, he knew: I've been interrupted, then –"

These are the words that tell of Colonel Bray's death at the end of Part 5 of *A Guest of Honour*, Nadine Gordimer's sixth novel, published in 1971 (469). Even as they describe what happens to his eyes, they are focused *through* his eyes; the sentence oscillates between subjective and objective polarities. This is consciousness at the limits of what it can know about itself at the moment it comes to an end, as the pendulum of awareness (what is inside/outside) comes to a stop. But there is no stop, that is no full stop, in the sentence. Even as it talks of interruption, it closes – but does not close – with a dash.

If anything, the sentence refers back to an earlier thought of Bray's, that explains it in a premonitory way:

it seemed to him he had come to understand that one could never hope to be free of doubt, of contradictions within, that this was the state in which one lived – the state of life itself – and no action could be free of it. There was no finality, while one lived, and when one died it would always be, in a sense, an interruption. (464-5)

Note the provisionality of the sentence: "it seemed to him he had come to understand." There is no resting place here for perspective even as perspective is announced: this is an understanding, but also only a seeming to understand. Note too in the texture of the sentence the rhythms of the commas: consciousness flowing forward, slowing back, peristaltic flow and ebb a form of interruption. Note also (again) the dashes, and observe that dashes became perhaps Gordimer's distinctive punctuation mark, adopted by her in the 1970s soon after *A Guest of Honour* was published to note speech without necessarily demarcating the speaker: in effect, un/markings speech as a different kind of interruption. If there is perspective in this moment of Bray's death, if there is something in the style that gestures towards it, in both respects it is one of interruption. This is philosophy, perspective and form together, whether regarding life, death, or the sentences or novels that write them.

A Guest of Honour would normally be read as a predominantly realist novel, but if that is so it should be not only, or even primarily, because of its representational modes but also because of its structure and vision. Certainly Gordimer wrote it under the impress of theorists she had been reading at the time, whose work would have

---

*This essay completes a triptych of my recent articles on Nadine Gordimer, the other two being "Gordimer's Pathologies" and "Gordimer's Home." Inevitably, I have drawn on my previous work generally, but I trust from a different angle.

influenced her in terms of both form and content. From Georg Lukács would have come the idea of “critical realism” not as a mode of representation but rather as a structural perspective locating the lives of its characters in relation to their collective historical surroundings.¹ Gordimer had also been reading Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which she would have observed a realism of a different kind – a political and historical realism indicating that the advent of independence did not mean the same as liberation, precisely because it also meant the advent of neocolonial dispensations. Indeed, *A Guest of Honour* quotes Fanon on this very matter regarding the betrayal of nationalist elites: “The treason is not national, it is social. The people must be taught to cry, ‘Stop Thief!’” (Gordimer, *A Guest* 292; Fanon 116). In this light, it is intriguing to think that Fanon’s form of historical realism may well imply a theory of interruption. The march to liberation is inevitably interrupted, to be resumed, perhaps repeatedly. Realism in this sense necessarily rules out any assumption of smoothness, whether in social relations or temporality – and we have already seen how that recognition works its way into the textures and perspectives of the novel. Gordimer, surveying not only the unnamed African country in which the novel is set but also her South African surroundings, clearly found a persuasive logic in such a recognition.

It is indicative therefore that *A Guest of Honour* ends on a note of irony. Bray’s papers are collected by others and published by Mweta, Bray’s former protégé, now responsible as President for the neocolonial repression that Bray had been struggling against. In the event, the Bray Report is an exercise that both ventriloquizes Bray and legitimizes Mweta, yet it also registers Bray’s thoughts and his long-term commitment. Invariably Gordimer’s novels end on such a note, and irony is itself a form of interruption, of doubleness in which one perspective counterpoints or cancels out the other. This is Gordimer, interrupted: writing under the sign of interruption, marking it out as an intrinsic modality, despite appearances to the contrary. Even in this most realist of Gordimer’s novels, and notwithstanding any assumptions of smoothness, continuity, and perspective, nothing is uninterrupted, even here. There will always be what Bray thinks of as “new combinations” (*A Guest* 385).

Recent discussion on form, genre and style in Gordimer’s work has given particular attention to the fragmented and disrupted in her fiction. It is a discussion that has gone in different directions, sometimes focusing on fragmentation as a matter of disruption in its own right, sometimes invoking it by way of opposition to any simple assumptions of a presiding realism in Gordimer’s work; sometimes these two concerns are combined. Some years ago Dominic Head read Gordimer’s fiction as manifesting an increasing trend away from realism towards postmodern features, leaving her in a “borderline” position where her work “combines a postmodernist decentring with a necessary ideological recentring” (193). Rita Barnard has deftly followed Fredric Jameson in seeing varied possibilities within the nature of realism itself. Exploring Gordimer’s later short stories, she finds in them shifts between different generic orientations, commenting that perhaps the “meaning” of Gordimer’s fiction “resides in these shifts from formal impulse to formal impulse or genre to genre” (“Gordimer’s Transitions” 25). Elsewhere, Barnard finds moments of transitive temporality in such moves, when

---

1. For more on this, see Clingman, *Novels* (10, 126).

the future presents itself as an irruption into the present; this is “the unforeseen, the emergent” in Gordimer’s work, the “not-yet-become” (Barnard, “Locating” 105, 104; see also Barnard, “Leaving” 55). Fiona McCann traces a presiding liminality in Gordimer’s *Jump and Other Stories*, marking their transitional positioning in South Africa, and (following Homi Bhabha’s formulation) the “insider’s outsideness” (Bhabha 14; McCann 35-6).² From a different perspective, Graham Riach detects in Gordimer’s stories of this period a form of “late style” akin to Beethoven’s in his late quartets, and as defined by Theodor Adorno and Edward Said. Here are various narrative erraticisms, idiosyncracies, impatiences, insinstances, producing a texture of break, rupture, almost spleen (though Riach does not use that word), and often, in Gordimer’s case, the (seeming) impenetrability of some of her sentences. Riach too invokes the question of the future, and the twinned issues of how Gordimer’s “fictional texts articulate political content in specifically literary ways” (1078).

These contributions open up Gordimer’s work in various productive respects. I want to follow them up from a particular angle, organized around certain questions. Barnard, for instance, gives a compelling, even bravura account of Gordimer’s oeuvre as an example of a “situated postcolonial modernism” (“Locating” 100-1), showing in particular her debt to Kafka, Proust, and Hemingway. As Gordimer said, her rejection of white supremacy came through “the apparently esoteric speleology of doubt, led by Kafka rather than Marx” (“A Bolter” 26). If this had something to do with the nature of Kafka, it also had quite a bit to do with the nature of South Africa; this perhaps was Gordimer’s “situatedness.” But it also, I would suggest, had a good deal to do with Gordimer’s nature as a writer, her orientations, perceptions, and forms of engagement that might have led her to *see* something in Kafka in the first place. As she put it in that same early essay (immediately following her comment on Kafka), “the problems of my country did not set me writing; on the contrary, it was learning to write that sent me falling, falling through the surface of ‘the South African way of life’” (“A Bolter” 26).

It is in this light that I want to think further about interruption – Gordimer’s forms of interruption of that surface. Where Barnard remarks that interruption is “a crucial technique in Gordimer’s best fiction” (“Locating” 114), I want to see if it is more than a matter simply or primarily of “technique.” I also want to see if interruption was primarily a function of Gordimer’s “late style.” Rather, it appears to me, interruption was implicit and sometimes explicit in Gordimer’s work from early on, and that it underwent development in response both to the changing world of South Africa and to Gordimer’s own developing capacities as a writer. My aim then is to view interruption in Gordimer’s work not in relation to any specific concept (such as realism, or late style, or liminality, important as these are), but rather as a matrix involving content, form, and narrative as the registration of an evolving aesthetic engagement – one that was remarkably persistent and durable, even as it underwent transformation. In short, I want to see interruption as a matter of Gordimer’s praxis as a writer all along – the praxis before, during, and *beyond* the concept, and a feature that develops its own theory of writing in her work. It is a praxis that has a history, and it is a form of signature in Gordimer’s fiction, the Jamesian figure in the carpet, so to speak.³

2. For more on liminality (in Gordimer’s *The Pickup*) see Clingman, *Grammar* 237.

3. That is, if there is a clear figure in the carpet in the Henry James story, which is not so certain: a reminder that no single concept is likely to be all-inclusive.

A last word in this preliminary account. From one point of view, we can think of interruption as simply a lens through which to view Gordimer's fiction – one that brings out certain features. As such, it may also seem arbitrary; perhaps it could be replaced by a different term. From another perspective, however, the idea of interruption might appear overdetermined, in that interruption is the very stuff of fiction, perhaps of all narrative. There is no story, no plot without shifts, challenges, reversals, whether that concerns the homecoming of Odysseus or a mysterious incident in a set of caves in India. This also means there is no character in fiction who does not face obstacles, boundaries, questions. If this is so, however, the task here is to see what Gordimer makes of that stuff in her fiction, and why. We will want to see how it is inflected by her conscious and unconscious imaginings, with implications for her work both existential, historical, formal and stylistic. This will also allow us to see interruption in her fiction as both more than arbitrary and less than overdetermined. Interruption became in Gordimer's time and place, and through her capacities and preoccupations as a writer, a form of perception, being, and understanding. In approaching it we approach the biography not of Gordimer but of her writing.

As so often, in exploring Gordimer's work, I return again to the short story I have called an early genetic blueprint for much of her fiction, "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?" (see Clingman, *Novels* 212). The story was first published in September 1947, when Gordimer would have been less than twenty-four years old. It came perhaps from some unbidden zones of consciousness in a young writer, where in a few condensed pages she would have discovered the fundamental landscape and attendant themes her fiction would thereafter so predominantly be drawn to. Of course the story did not appear *ex nihilo* or *de novo*. In her characteristic work around that time Gordimer was writing what became known as her "masters and servants" stories, exploring the ironies of hierarchy and intimacy in the domestic racialized settings of South Africa. But "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?" took the field of those encounters, and both generalized and concentrated its territory. In one respect it externalized the structure of Gordimer's fictional concerns, taking the domestic setting and locating it outside, in another place. In a complementary respect it became an inner diagram of Gordimer's writing, setting up at some level both concrete and abstract the characteristic terrain of its exploration and enaction.

Key aspects of the story are well known. It begins with what Gordimer calls a "reversal of the elements" in which the sky moves "like the sea on a silent day" (115). Both reversal and silence will be important, because although the story tells of a dramatic encounter and more than one reversal, its effects will be felt inwardly by the character through whom it is focalized, in a realm of silence which she may have to spend a lifetime contemplating. Here is the young white woman (though she is not explicitly racialized) making her way across open territory on the edge of a town. There she sees a figure approaching – a black man, who seems to excite both fear in her and the magnetism of an unavoidable encounter. The encounter occurs, and it is violent, but not what the young woman expects: not a sexual attack but a lunge for her handbag and parcel. The man is identified with the natural setting; the young woman is out of place, in no man's land, the emblematic space of this double reversal. The young woman surrenders her belongings, fleeing through trees and bushes, until she scrabbles through a barbed

wire fence and regains the dubious safety of the white settlement. She does not ask for help, she cannot face having to explain, and she cannot explain to herself what her struggle was about. She regains the road, but her road will now be a different one.

A story of interruption in no man's land, where space and time seem to open up and then resume, except they are no longer the same space and time. Here race and gender complicate one another, working along contradictory axes of power: the black man and the white woman. Space is important in another respect, for on the edge of "settlement" it is undefined, natural in some ways, threatening in others, beyond the realm of safety. This will be the characteristic space of so much of Gordimer's fiction, where blacks and whites engage with one another, threaten one another, attract one another, repel one another, where subconscious emanations and bodily instincts are in tension, all of it generated by unequal structures of power and inflected by their distortions. How could there be a simple logic for all of this? There are so many vectors at play, all criss-crossing one another in a field of interruption – if I can literalize this space on the basis of the story. It is significant, therefore, that the general logic of Gordimer's stories of the period, most of them set in a broader framework of realism, is itself interrupted in "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?" Here its realism (recognizable setting, characters, perspectives) is complicated by an entry into a symbolic mode, where that symbolism has to do with issues that combine the epic or archetypal (liminal space, the testing ground, sexuality) with the profoundly historical, emanating from *this* time and place and no other. One mode has interrupted another even in this very early story; there has been a "reversal of the elements" in what now becomes a *different* form of archetypal terrain inseparable from this combination in Gordimer's fiction.

Other stories of this time and succeeding years mirror these issues. In "The Train from Rhodesia" (1947) a journey by train is interrupted by a stop at a rural station, but the more important interruption is in the prevailing liberal assumptions and colonial habits of mind of a white couple. The young man bargains down the cost of a wooden lion sculpture his wife has admired, and she is revolted by his meanness: a relationship interrupted by context, by encounter. Yet even here, if this seems to be wholly about content, there are formal and stylistic notes. Again we are in a no man's land in this rural space, where prevailing patterns in the lives of the two white characters are both displaced and revealed. Here too topography is mirrored by geometry, in this case triangulated in racial and gendered terms between the white woman, her husband, and the old black sculptor. Here is that image yet again: at the station "the sand became the sea" (94). Intriguingly in so early a story, Gordimer does not use quotation marks; rather, speech is unmarked in the flow of the text – except (again) for the occasional dash, a harbinger of her later practice. Also, if the forward movement of the train is interrupted, it is not only by the stop: as it leaves, "[t]he blind end of the train was being pulled helplessly out of the station" (99). It may seem excessive to compare this to Walter Benjamin's angel of history, being driven backwards into the future with the disaster of "progress" piling up at its feet, but the analogy is there, even and perhaps especially in so brief a moment (Benjamin, "On the Concept" 392). This is the logic of placement, belonging, comfort, interrupted to the point where a certain kind of content becomes the inner form of the fiction, shaping it, outlining its contours and lineaments, the very nature of its engagement. If there is something like a late style in Gordimer, it was not unconnected with formations and preoccupations she developed early on.

We see similar patterns in other early stories, such as “Six Feet of the Country” (1956). Here irony prevails, and again irony is a kind of double-movement, a contradictory polarity of perspective. On a white-owned farm just outside Johannesburg a young black man from Rhodesia has died. The authorities return the wrong body for burial, to the anguish of the young man’s father and the local black community, and the irritation of the white farm owner who is also the narrator of the story. Revealed primarily through his narration is his self-serving complacency and liberal hypocrisy. This is not so exceptional in formal terms: a morally fallible first-person narrator has a long literary history, but note the particular implication here of spatialization as perspective is differentiated. As in “The Train from Rhodesia,” the geometry is one of triangulation between the narrator, his wife Lerice, and the farmworker, Petrus, with whom the narrator has been negotiating – or haggling – over the fate of the body. “She and Petrus both kept their eyes on me as I spoke, and, oddly, for those moments they looked exactly alike, though it sounds impossible...” (19). Again, white husband and wife are divided in relation to a black figure, but if Lerice and Petrus look alike to the narrator, then there is no simple equation between them, and in this respect the geometry is not only triangulated but uneven. The narrator, Lerice, and Petrus are on different levels of “height” or authority: the triangle has vertical as well as horizontal dimensions. Moreover, there are other implicit perspectives in the story – for instance that of the dead man’s father, who realizes the body in the coffin is too heavy to be his son. Perspective is refracted – polarized, “angularized,” if one might coin a term – in multiple directions, as if it had multiple points of origin: no mean achievement in a story with a single narrator. This is origin, perspective, narration, geometry interrupted.

One could mention other stories from this period, for instance, “Which New Era Would That Be?” (1956), where the intrusive element is a young white woman whose faux-liberal gestures towards understanding and racial honesty are quite simply abominable. She disturbs a gathering in more than one way, and again perspective undergoes various kinds of angular alternations. But it may be worth taking the account forward, into the territory of Gordimer’s novels. *A World of Strangers* (1958), though only her second published novel, is quite intriguing in this regard. The main character is Toby Hood, a publisher from England (loosely based on Anthony Sampson, the editor of *Drum*) who arrives in the “world of strangers” that is Johannesburg. There he faces an environment of dizzying division, split between the white and black denizens of the city, and Toby’s alternating choices. Is he drawn to Cecil Rowe (shades of Cecil Rhodes, shades in her name of sexual ambiguity in the novel?), the flighty and unanchored woman from the wealthy northern suburbs, or to Toby’s black friend Steven Sitole, the racy black journalist from Sophiatown, or to Sam Mofokenzazi, also a journalist and the graver and more responsible figure? Angularity is apparent from the outset, not only because of the divided world, but also because Toby is the outsider whose perspective defamiliarizes the “real.” Again the first-person narrative is a complex one, ranged in this way both within and against its context.

The key moment, however, comes towards the end of the novel, when Toby is on a hunting trip with his white cronies, and here the text shifts into a different gear. Many years ago, when I first analyzed the faultlines and layerings of *A World of Strangers*, I did so via Pierre Macherey’s theories of the contradictory text and the “not-said,” but now I want to view them through the particular lens I am suggesting here. So, in that

hunting scene, outside of the environs of Johannesburg, Toby finds (or loses) himself in a blighted landscape with symbolic overtones where in animal howls in the middle of the night he hears “the echo of a pack of nightmares” (227). By the end of the trip, the dog the hunters have brought along (suitably named Grace) is dead, just like the prey they have tracked, and Toby returns to the city to find that his friend Steven has been killed in a car accident after a police raid on a club. This prompts the ending of the novel, where Toby, on the point of leaving South Africa, appears to commit himself to Sam, who is married and expecting a child. Optimism is shaded by residual ambiguities (will Toby return or won’t he?), but other aspects of the hunting scenario may be more fundamental. Again, we are in open and undefined territory, a no man’s land, where in a kind of genre alteration something important is revealed. And if this interrupts the prevailing realism of the novel, it also suggests something crucial: that this no man’s land is one of *adjacency* – linked with the world from which it emanates but not identical with it. Adjacency in this guise establishes a different syntax in the novel. Partly as a setting it is metonymic, but this is not the ordinary school version of metonymy as simple representation. Rather, something *different* happens here that sets the rest of the novel in a different light. Adjacency occurs in horizontal space, therefore, but also suggests something of depth: the different reality lurking beneath the surface of the real, which rises up (“like a pack of nightmares”) at this point. The setting then is both metonymic and metaphoric, if we adopt the schema laid out by Roman Jakobson, as long as we see these functions as both revelatory *and* differential.⁴ The shift is angular and refractive, an alternation of vision and perspective, a signal from a different modality. It is a move, if we can allow the word to resonate in different registers, of *displacement*: in every way a form of interruption as well as an interruption of the novel’s form.

One could plot versions of such displacement and interruption in other of Gordimer’s novels. *Occasion for Loving* (1963) concerns both a cross-racial love affair that interrupts the logic of apartheid, and the logic of apartheid that interrupts the affair. In *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966) the central character, Elizabeth Van Den Sandt, finds her life interrupted by a looming decision on whether to aid an underground political movement. Here again there is a formal shift in the latter pages of the novel as, in the early hours of waking, Elizabeth imagines the astronauts circling the earth above her in space. The suggestions are mythical and archetypal. In a time of political crisis, the perspective is (in a doubled sense) spatialized, interrupted, the realism of the text superseded. And then, if we follow this sequence of novels, there comes *A Guest of Honour* with its own definitions of interruption.

If there is a work that establishes the registers of displacement in their most intriguing formal terms, however, it is surely *The Conservationist* (1974). The contours of what I view as Gordimer’s masterpiece are well known, so I will just review some of their lineations here. The setting is again one of adjacency: the white protagonist Mehring’s farm, just outside Johannesburg. The farm itself occupies a kind of conceptual adjacency, because the wealthy Mehring keeps it as a kind of faux-farm, an indulgence as well as a tax-haven: not quite a real farm, but a simulacrum of one. In this doubly metonymic setting the underground comes to the surface, interrupting the real in multiple ways. The

4. For further discussion on Jakobson, see Clingman, *Grammar* 13-5.

key figure is that of a murdered black man who has been buried shallowly on the farm by the police. Insistently, the presence of the body comes to occupy Mehring's mind, becoming his *doppelgänger* with a difference, his reproach, haunting, threat. Eventually a storm from the Mozambique Channel raises the body to the surface, at which point Mehring flees in crisis, meeting his fate – symbolic as much as “real” – in another form of no man's land, an abandoned mine-dump on the outskirts of the city. In a chiasmic shift, Mehring's history of dominance has been interrupted, while in some prophetic way that of the black body resumes, as he is laid to rest by the black farmworkers: “He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them” (267).

Added to this are forms of textual disruption: almost the entire novel is told through Mehring's prevailing monologue, expressed through composite elements of stream of consciousness and free indirect style, but this is inhabited by layerings of ironic sub-textual double meaning. To take only the most obvious example, the black body whom we are repeatedly told has “nothing” will in this countertext prophetically come into his own with “everything,” while Mehring will ruminate contentedly in his fields that he “want[s] for nothing” (159). Gordimer also interrupts the narrative with a series of citations drawn from Zulu religious tradition, which disturb and obliquely appear to control the direction of Mehring's story. Farm, body, the shallowly repressed recognitions of Mehring's psyche: all become a kind of alter-text to his supervening reality. The flow of his conscious and unconscious life is overcome by the symbolic interventions of nature and emanations of the haunted present as well as the unknown but profoundly intimated future. Realism contends with different kinds of psychic, semiotic, historic, ecological and formal shifts, all of them rising to the surface to overturn the text of Mehring's placement and power. Gordimer's masterpiece is also a masterpiece of interruption.

If anything, Gordimer's succeeding novel, *July's People* (1981) takes this further. Time itself is interrupted in the imagined futurity of a revolutionary moment that also interrupts the lives of the Smales family. Space is interrupted in their flight to July's village. In this setting both existence and history inhabit interruption not as the point of intercession between one moment and the next, but rather as a prevailing and extended *condition*. In what Gordimer (following Antonio Gramsci) described as a period of interregnum, sequence itself is interrupted: “the old is dying and the new cannot be born.”⁵ Relationships, in the classic raced and gendered Gordimerian triangle of Maureen, her husband Bam, and their (former) servant July, are all interrupted, caught up in the “morbid symptoms” of Gramsci's formulation (Gramsci 276). For Maureen, at the heart of the novel, there is no “going back” (the repeated phrase of the novel) to her former life, and no going forward in anything like the same way. Hence the mythic and apocalyptic resonances of the ending, the transfer into a different kind of vision of the future at this limit of space and time (Clingman, *Grammar* 218-9). *July's People* was part of a more general movement in South African writing in this period, which in various ways interrupted the surface of the real (Clingman, “Writing”), and the vision of *July's People* is a particularly concentrated version.

What then of Gordimer's later fiction? Here I should like to dip in and out of some moments to indicate how the story of interruption became developed and elaborated

---

5. Gramsci's definition of the interregnum provided (in a slightly different translation) both the epigraph to *July's People* and the key marker for Gordimer's essay, “Living in the Interregnum.” See Gramsci (276).

in her work. Take for instance, a short sequence from *The House Gun* (1998). It comes when Harald and Claudia Lindgard visit their son Duncan, who has been arrested for murder, in prison:

Signals fly like bats about the room. Don't ask me. We only want to know what to do. I need to see you. If you don't tell us. I don't want to see you. Whatever: have to know. You can't know. At least how did it. You don't have to get mixed up. You can't keep us out. Don't ask for what you won't be able to take. Come. I want to see you. Don't come. (30)

Is this simply a version of Gordimer's late style? Perhaps, but there is a specific logic in the passage, an unfolding of styles inherent in earlier work. There are no speech markers at all here; rather we have fusions and crossings of consciousness in this particular triangle of mother, father, son. Are the words voiced or unvoiced, signals gestured in a look, a tilt of the head? Syntax is interrupted, thoughts unfinished, there are cross-flows between interrogative and indicative moods, without the usual signals of punctuation. This is textual and subtextual communication, each gesture interrupted by another – a kind of wave interference. The speech act – if there is one here – is composite, collective, but comprised only of its echoes and refractions. If we take the “bat” analogy seriously, this is a form of semi-blind navigation, a kind of echolocation in which the position of each figure is situated in relation to the others. Bakhtinian dialogue, in which countervoices are infused in the voice of the subject, is multiplied in such a formulation (Bakhtin 265; Clingman, “Surviving”). This is angularity hypostatized, yet also marked by a kind of fluidity, occupied in challenge and counterchallenge, hectic, resigned, resistant, panicked. There are other examples of such reverberation in the novel, written into the microtexture of its sentences.

This may be a form of late style, but I would suggest it is the opposite of simply idiosyncratic. Here Gordimer's patterns of interruption have taken on expressive forms and implications impossible to separate from the moment of the novel, written three or four years into South Africa's transition out of apartheid. The writer's mood and the moment mesh, interrogate each other. From one point of view the historical “interruption” of apartheid was over, just as the history of colonialism in Africa came to an end. Yet it was also an interruption with massive effects that would never go away. So too was the postapartheid resumption an interruption – of lives, geometries, habits of mind. The novel is founded on a murder, and the murdered man – Duncan's former lover – lies “under the ground of the city” (261). This is a different kind of adjacency, as if the body in *The Conservationist* had been murdered yet again, but new life must emerge from that history. This is the adjacency of the past to the present, but it is also a space in which characters may come to be “beside” their former selves in a different kind of no man's land. A son may be a murderer, his privileged white parents must find their way. In this setting old relationships are disrupted and new ones may start to form, alternate versions of the non-biological family that begin to emerge in the novel – as in the figure of Kulu Dladla, black and gay, who becomes a surrogate son for Harald and Claudia and a kind of father to the child of Duncan and his girlfriend Natalie. In short, this is a space and time of dis/articulation, in which locution is always interlocution, relational geometry is polygonal, and navigation a novel and semi-blind undertaking. The terms become both historically and stylistically loaded: *re-generation*, *dis/articulation*. No surprise that it should be focalized in the oscillations and angularities of Gordimer's sentences. In particular, we see these “othered” forms of consciousness and speech: new kinds

of interruptive syntax in the bruised collective beginning to emerge from the crime of its history.

Gordimer's *The Pickup* (2001), written at the very end of the millennium, takes a cue from *A Guest of Honour* in that a significant part of it is set in an unspecified country. As a novel it involves a veritable landscape of interruption. One of its two main characters, Julie, is interrupted in her journey to the EL-AY café in Johannesburg when her car breaks down. Her life is interrupted by the person – and other main character – who fixes it, whom she first knows as Abdu, an undocumented Arab migrant. Abdu's life has been one of perpetual interruption in his quest to gain what he calls “permanent residence” in a variety of countries, and now his life in South Africa is interrupted by his love affair with Julie. That in turn is interrupted when he receives a departure order – as an illegal immigrant, he must leave the country within a certain period. Julie then interrupts her life again: she and Abdu get married and leave for his own country where they take up life with his family. In this transition, Abdu's proper name is revealed as Ibrahim ibn Musa: in English, Abraham son of Moses. Like any of Gordimer's novels of relationship, however, this is not an uninterrupted one, even between the two characters, and not only because of external circumstances but because those circumstances are ingrained in the very texture of their relationship. Ibrahim and Julie meet one another on the uneven terrain of their different histories, their different levels of authority, identity, and power, the angles of their different perspectives. Julie's home seems inauthentic and unreal to her but real and attractive to Ibrahim; his home seems unreal to him but becomes a place of belonging to her. Their relationship will be interrupted yet again when Ibrahim leaves his home for life and work in the United States, but Julie waits for him to come back to his village.

From this perspective we can say that interruption is embedded in the form of the novel – the way content configures its shape, the way that shape becomes both a determinant and a kind of content. Yet again this is embodied at the level of style – perhaps Gordimer's late style, but a style nonetheless consistent with her developing themes and visions all along. Yet again we see it at the level of her sentences, most significantly in modes of inner and outward vision and dialogue. In settings that are a mix of the homely/unhomely for both Ibrahim and Julie, their gaze towards one another is not one of parity or mutuality but an oscillation in the very moment of perception: Julie is “oddly conscious of him, Ibrahim, her husband, yes – watching her as if to perceive before she did what she might be seeing” (127); alternately, “[s]he often has the sense that he is not looking at her when his regard is on her; it is she who is looking for herself reflected in those eyes” (129). Ibrahim is ashamed of what Julie sees in his home country: “Not for her; no, that was it” (133). In such a moment his view purports to be located in her mind – a “reading” of her mind, so to speak – even as it is a reflection of his own: this is the relationship *as* the faultline that both connects and divides. Ibrahim applies for papers so they can leave his country, and tells Julie about it:

I started right away to get us out of here.

But where to. She was reading down the form as she spoke. What sort of country.

Does she still believe in choice. But he gave her his slow rare smile that he knew she was, always, moved to coax from him. Any one we can have. (140)

Again there are no speech markers, no punctuation to differentiate between the interrogative and declarative. This is not simply to make life difficult for readers. Rather speech

is a kind of reverberation between Julie and Ibrahim, speech a kind of thought, thought a kind of speech, altered in the very way it sounds between them; in this dialogue a question is also a form of recognition. So, “Does she still believe in choice” could be a thought from either of them before, in this oscillatory motion, it appears to emanate from Julie’s mind – but only because it is prompted by the perspective she knows Ibrahim would have, and which he therefore silently elicits from her. Similarly, the awareness of the rare smile that Julie likes to coax out of Ibrahim is a recognition that could come from either. Speech is an expression of this *otherwise* dialogue. But if the lack of markers signals the flow between the two characters, it registers the simultaneous fragmentation.

This again is Gordimer, interrupted; seeing what she, specifically, is able to see and write as a writer. It is, as I have suggested, a kind of signature, written here in reversed and reversible script.

In this way we arrive at Gordimer’s other late work, including her collections of short stories, *Jump and Other Stories* (1991), *Loot and Other Stories* (2003), and *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black* (2007), as well as her final novel, *No Time Like the Present* (2012). If we take *Jump* as emblematic, again we see the forms and varieties of interruption at work. It is there in “Once Upon a Time,” both in the horrifying story of a family interrupted by machinations of its own making, and in its fusions of realism and fantasy modes. It is there in the oscillating perspectives of a hunting party in “Spoils.” It is there in the fractured relationship between an underground political operative and the bourgeois woman he has a half-expedient half-real affair with in “Safe Houses,” or the way, in “Comrades,” in which a white woman, aligned with the anti-apartheid movement, has her view suddenly disrupted by the presence of young black comrades in her house. In “Keeping Fit” a white runner out for a jog in a no man’s land bordering on a black township has his world interrupted by an event that threatens to unsettle the foundations of his existence. “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off” tells the hidden, interrupted story of death and a broken cross-racial family connection. The title story, “Jump,” concerns a character in a condition of suspension, his life as a state of interruption in the aftermath of his history as a mercenary, before a possible jump might end it. The refugee children in “The Ultimate Safari” have had their lives wholly undone in their journey from Mozambique to South Africa, and that too is a story with alternating perspectives. We can see interruption in the incursions of an authorial (or authorial-like) figure in a number of the stories, breaking some of the conventions of standard fiction. We might even think of the volume *Jump* as a whole as a discontinuous novel of the South African condition in its varied narratives, internal dialogues, fault-lines and unequal combinations, its angular topics and topographies. We would find similar, and sometimes even more pronounced, versions of its patterns in Gordimer’s other late works.

I have written this essay with a profound awareness of Nadine Gordimer’s death in July 2014, and the kind of afterlife she leaves behind. In a completely different sense we might say this was Gordimer, interrupted. It was in fact this subliminal thought that initially drew me back to her definition of Colonel Bray’s death in *A Guest of Honour*. Work and life are perhaps of a piece in such a view, one that Gordimer herself might have been at peace with, just as Bray’s death involves both acceptance and belonging. Or perhaps she would not have been at peace, given the characteristic orientations of

refusal – of the obvious, of the expected – that also made her a writer. Perhaps we can see Gordimer's death then as in accord with her life and work, organized around one of her key codes of limit, transition, and oblique continuity, but also of unceasing interrogation, alternation. As far as her writing is concerned, perhaps it will always be possible to see it through the interruptions of new perceptions, new forms, new enquiries.

Stephen CLINGMAN

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Works Cited

- BAKHTIN, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.
- BARNARD, Rita. "Leaving the House of the White Race." *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place*. New York: Oxford UP, 2007.
- . "Nadine Gordimer's Transitions: Modernism, Realism, Rupture." In "Nadine Gordimer, *Jump and Other Stories* : Parcours Critiques." Ed. Vanessa Guignery and Christian Gutleben. Special issue, *Cycnos* 34.3 (2018): 19-33.
- . "Locating Gordimer: Modernism, Postcolonialism, Realism." *Modernism, Postcolonialism, and Globalism: Anglophone Literature, 1950 to the Present*. Ed. Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses. New York: Oxford UP, 2019. 99-122.
- BENJAMIN, Walter. "On the Concept of History." 1940. *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*. Ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Trans. Edmund Jephcott *et al.* (this translation: Harry Zohn). Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2006. 389-400.
- BHABHA, Homi K. "Introduction." *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 1-18.
- CLINGMAN, Stephen. *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*. 1986. 2nd ed., Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992.
- . "Surviving Murder: Oscillation and Triangulation in Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.1 (Spring 2000): 139-58.
- . *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009.
- . "Writing the Interregnum: Literature and the Demise of Apartheid." *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*. Ed. David Attwell and Derek Attridge. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012. 633-51.
- . "Gordimer's Pathologies." Commemorative section on Nadine Gordimer, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42.6 (2016): 1033-44.
- . "Gordimer's Home." In "Nadine Gordimer, *Jump and Other Stories* : Parcours Critiques". Ed. Vanessa Guignery and Christian Gutleben. Special issue, *Cycnos* 34.3 (2018): 73-92.
- FANON, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. 1965; Preface Jean-Paul Sartre, trans. Constance Farrington. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967.
- GORDIMER, Nadine. "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet? 1947. *Face to Face*. Johannesburg: Silver Leaf Books, 1949. 115-9.
- . "The Train from Rhodesia." *Face to Face*. 1947. Johannesburg: Silver Leaf Books, 1949. 94-100.
- . "Six Feet of the Country." *Six Feet of the Country*. London: Gollancz, 1956. 7-20.
- . "Which New Era Would That Be?" *Six Feet of the Country*. London: Gollancz, 1956. 81-97.
- . *A World of Strangers*. London: Gollancz, 1958.
- . "A Bolter and the Invincible Summer." 1963. *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*. Ed. and intr. Stephen Clingman. New York: Knopf, 1988. 19-28.
- . *Occasion for Loving*. London: Gollancz, 1963.
- . *The Late Bourgeois World*. London: Cape, 1966.
- . *A Guest of Honour*. London: Cape, 1971.
- . *The Conservationist*. 1974. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978.
- . *July's People*. London: Cape, 1981.
- . "Living in the Interregnum." 1982. *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*. Ed. and intr. Stephen Clingman. New York: Knopf, 1988. 261-84.
- . *Jump and Other Stories*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 1991.
- . *The House Gun*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.
- . *The Pickup*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.
- . *Loot and Other Stories*. London: Bloomsbury, 2003.
- . *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

- . *No Time Like the Present*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.
- GRAMSCI, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.
- HEAD, Dominic. *Nadine Gordimer*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- JAKOBSON, Roman. "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances." *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2. The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1971. 239-59.
- JAMES, Henry. "The Figure in the Carpet." 1896. *The Figure in the Carpet and Other Stories*. Ed. and intr. Frank Kermode. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986. 354-400.
- LUKÁCS, Georg. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. Trans. John and Necke Mander. 1963. London: Merlin, 1972.
- MACHEREY, Pierre. *A Theory of Literary Production*. Trans. Geoffrey Wall. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.
- MCCANN, Fiona. "Liminality, Transience, and the Destabilisation of 'Home' in Nadine Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories*." In "Nadine Gordimer, *Jump and Other Stories* : Parcours Critiques." Ed. Vanessa Guignery and Christian Gutleben. Special issue, *Cynos* 34.3 (2018): 35-53.
- RIACH, Graham K. "The Late Nadine Gordimer." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42.6 (December 2016): 1077-94.