NADINE GORDIMER

20 NOVEMBER 1923 · 13 JULY 2014

THE FIRST TIME I met Nadine Gordimer, it was March 1980, and I was, if not terrified, then filled with a certain sense of dread because she had a fearsome reputation. There I was, standing outside the heavy wooden door embedded in her garden wall in Parktown, summoning up the courage to go in. It was early in the morning, for Gordimer's work hours started early. I was a graduate student, setting out on what became my doctoral thesis, and my purpose now was to interview her. I had sent her a paper I had written; she had seemed to like it, so that would help. A former history professor at University of the Witwatersrand, Phyllis Lewsen, had advised me: if you get to speak to her, ask her about her non-fiction—it's very good. And so I went in. Whether it was due to the seminar paper or the non-fiction, what I found once I was speaking with her in her living room—a room I came to know so well—changed everything. I asked her, "What should I call you?" and after a moment's thought, she said, "Call me Nadine." That was the beginning.

What I found there, as I might have expected, was a woman of tremendous lucidity and intelligence. No surprise. But what I also found, if not wholly surprising, was utterly welcome. It was an opening up, a readiness to take questions seriously and answer them. And then, out of the blue, extraordinary generosity, for Gordimer asked if I would like to see her collection of papers, unarranged in a cabinet upstairs and in a metal chest. This was hardly the way for a great writer to keep her work, but there it was, and it was the proverbial trove. There I found stray essays, an early unpublished novel, typescripts of her ranging writing through the years. In a later time, I would have photographed it all on my smartphone or indexed it on my laptop. But neither laptops nor smartphones existed; even my interviews with her were conducted with a creaking and squeaky tape machine. I hauled things off to Xerox them—and she let me. I picked and chose, barely aware, for what did I know, that I should simply have copied it all.

So started our relationship in which she was, first of all, the subject of my scholarship—or at least her work was. Later, there was another measure of her generosity, for she invited me to collect and edit a volume of her non-fiction (that non-fiction again). She could have asked anyone, but despite my status as a pre-doctoral non-entity, she asked me—and so we became collaborators. There, at various times, I saw the writer at work. When a question came up regarding one or another essay, a matter of phrasing or meaning, she would make quick and pragmatic decisions. I, who wavered over most things, was amazed at the sureness of her craft.

And so, too, we became friends. But not once, during all the time I knew her, did she ever try to influence anything I said, not about her, her work, or anything else. She had a tremendous, almost old-fashioned intellectual integrity. She believed not only in the right but, more importantly, the obligation of everyone to tell the world as they saw it. It was what she herself did, and she expected no less from others. “I am sending you my new novel,” she would say, “and you must tell me exactly what you think.” Unlike many, she meant it, although in truth it was sometimes hard for me to live up to that expectation. She had sharp and serious opinions. You could disagree with her, but know then to expect at the very least an in-depth discussion. There was never any sentimental or faux form of agreement just for the sake of it. It meant she sometimes lived in a punishing world, but that was how she did things; to her, it was an intrinsic part of one’s responsibility, even a matter of existential exhilaration as a human being. I am not sure that repression had a meaning for her, at least when it came to the world of ideas. The controversy over the Roberts biography, which he claimed was a matter of censorship, to her was about a loss of trust.

*

She was born into a different world, a different era, in her small mining town of Springs, near Johannesburg. Her father was from the Lithuanian/Latvian border, her mother from England; both were Jewish, but Nadine grew up knowing very little of any Jewish heritage and got details on it wrong with some regularity in her fiction. Her first task, in this setting, was to discover that South Africa was worth writing about. Of course, she was by no means the first or only South African writer, but growing up, all her models were European. By definition, that was where literature came from; she had to decolonize her talent. But the dawning realization came—those masters, mistresses, and servants; the racially divided world she belonged to; the energies, passions, creativity, and despair of the black townships; the personal, lived experience of the political world; the deeper texts and subtexts of South African life—these and more became her topics, her roving ground. She followed where her instincts led, and later was clear on the fact that it was writing that led her to politics rather than the other way round because, as she once memorably put it, “politics is character in South Africa.” If you were interested in character, you would soon realize that the world of apartheid suffused every aspect of the personal. Gordimer, chronicler and more of the personal, became the chronicler and more of the political in South Africa as well.

She had a precocious aptitude: her first story, a children's fable, was published in a Sunday paper when she was 13; she was 15 when her first adult story appeared. To begin with short stories were her métier, and few could equal the diamond-cutter precision she brought to her craft. Then, by the 1950s, came the novels, and over the decades, volumes of stories and novels alternated with impressive consistency. So, too, there was the non-fiction—which I had been instructed to ask her about. Gordimer travelled to Egypt, the Congo, and Madagascar and wrote about those places with a sensuous feel for landscape and atmosphere. As she became more immersed in the world of Johannesburg and the temper of the times, she spoke and wrote about politics—about censorship, on the need to speak up against oppression, on why Bram Fischer chose jail, on the 1976 Soweto Uprising. She wrote about the chaos and apparently looming revolution of the 1980s with exactitude and imagination. Long before the political world understood it, she followed Antonio Gramsci in defining that moment as the "interregnum," when the old was dying, the new could not be born, and the present was filled with a great diversity of morbid symptoms.

It was, in many respects, her dissection of those morbid symptoms as well as the straitened attempt to come to grips with an unfolding history that characterized her great novels of the 1970s and '80s. *The Conservationist*, published in 1974, foretold in intensely realist yet richly symbolic form the eventual reclamation by black South Africans of their land. In my view, it is not only the most poetic of her works but also her masterpiece for the depth of its prophetic adherence in a time when its vision seemed all but impossible. *Burger's Daughter*, which appeared in 1979, focused on the daughter of an anti-apartheid political figure (loosely based on Bram Fischer) finding her way in the challenging context of the Black Consciousness movement. There, a grand—even monumental—political grasp was fused by the end of the novel with a moving, perhaps surprising tenderness. *July's People* (1981) was set in an imaginary future of revolutionary breakdown, but its real revolutionary gesture was to understand the underlying codes and assumptions of an apocalyptic present through the perspective an imagined future could provide.

Gordimer wrote solo, almost never showing her work pre-publication to anyone; she had the courage of her artistic convictions, prepared to let judgment fall where it may. Of course judgment came: in Europe and North America, she was lionized as the voice of conscience in South Africa and one of the most significant writers in the world. In South Africa, the reception was not always so charitable. Could a South African be that important, especially when her books

were sometimes so uncomfortable to read? Certainly the government's view was clear as a number of her novels were banned. Tigerish as ever, she took that on directly, always aware that the issue was not what happened to her work alone but the censorship of all writers in South Africa. Between the lionization and the deprecation, she had to find her own way, keep her own sense of the path she was on.

How did she do that? I believe it was by maintaining her sense of priorities, and even a sense of division in her artistic and political commitments. In her own mind, she was first and foremost a writer, and nothing could displace that. "Nothing I say here will be as true as my fiction," she declared in her essay "Living in the Interregnum." It was only by being true to her writing that a deeper and truer politics than the political world knew of could emerge. Along these lines, she quoted Gabriel García Márquez: "the writer's duty—his revolutionary duty, if you like—is to write well." As a citizen, Gordimer would "speak out," as she put it; as a writer she would speak inwardly as well as out—the mysterious combination of which writers are capable. She never lost her dedication to that.

Gordimer may have written solo, but she was part of a community of writers. In the heady days of the 1950s, she formed friendships with Es'kia Mphahlele, Nat Nakasa, Lewis Nkosi, and others. In the 1970s, she championed a rising generation of black poets, people such as Oswald Mtshali, Mongane Wally Serote, and Sipho Sepamla. Just a few years later, under the influence of the Black Consciousness Movement, some black writers would barely speak to her, challenging the right of whites to write about (or "appropriate" was the term) the lives of black characters. Gordimer, mixing the inward with the outward, insisted not only on the right but, as usual, the obligation. Whites and blacks *did* know one another, she insisted, and the complexities of those relationships was exactly what they had to write about. How good it was, then, in later periods, to see friendships re-emerge, and the affection bordering on veneration that many black writers had for Gordimer, not least because she had worked through tough times with them. She lived those times with the allegiances of both the citizen and writer.

In the latter stages of apartheid, Gordimer embodied some of her affiliations more overtly. She appeared in court as a witness for African National Congress members charged with crimes against the state; she attended funerals in the townships where black youths were at risk from attack by the police; she was a founding member of the Congress of South African Writers, dedicated, among other things, to making books and writing workshops available in black communities. As apartheid came to a close, many paid tribute, including Nelson

Mandela, who came to see her as soon as he emerged from prison. Yet Gordimer's post-apartheid novels continued to explore South African reality without fear or favor in all its contradictions and pressing problems. Nothing she would say would be as true as her fiction.

Through all this, one pattern never changed. Time and again her characters would face an impending choice regarding whether or not to leave South Africa. Time and again the choice became clear: it was not to leave, or, once having left, to return. South Africa was forever Nadine Gordimer's place.

*

Ever since that morning in March 1980, I saw Nadine periodically, whenever time, geography, and circumstances allowed. Serendipitously in 1991, in the very week she was announced as the winner of the Nobel Prize, we had invited her to my department to present our most distinguished lecture. This was a trick we later managed again, for exactly the same thing occurred in 2003 when J. M. Coetzee won the Nobel. When Nadine arrived, the phone was ringing incessantly in our small condominium, and our older daughter, then 6, asked what it was all about. I explained that Nadine had won the Nobel Prize. "Has she won it before?" asked my daughter, and I said no, you could only get it once. "Ah," she said, "it's like the chicken pox!" Nadine loved that story; it kept things in perspective, and she used it in one of her Nobel speeches.

We corresponded with each other; we spoke on the phone. Always she was interested in what I was writing and would tell me about her own work. In later years, she would bemoan some of what she saw around her in the post-heroic world South Africa had become, but her abiding fealty was never in question. When her close friend Maureen Isaacson suggested I call her, I spoke with her twice in the last weeks before she died, something for which I will always be grateful.

How do I and will I remember her? To many she was distant, perhaps cold, her writing demanding, even obstructive. I saw it as filled with an underlying passion and deep feeling. I remember sitting with her in her garden, her eyes observing all with a piercing yet intimate effect. Although small, she had the poise and balance of the dancer she had been as a young girl—and it was there in her sentences as well. There was steadfastness, loyalty, toughness, tenderness, and most of all great friendship. The last time I saw her was in July 2012 when I stayed in her house for a few days—the house exactly the same as I had seen it 30 years before. We went together to the Market Theatre in

Johannesburg, one of her great pleasures in the city she loved, and saw *Woza Albert!* Although the weather was freezing, there was in her an unmistakable zeal, even as she became frailer, to live life to the brim. She had the rarest clarity of mind, body, and spirit, there for everyone to see and read in her work.

Elected 2008

Stephen Clingman[1]
Distinguished Professor of English
University of Massachusetts

1 Stephen Clingman is the author of *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* and edited Gordimer's collection of essays, *The Essential Gesture*. His biography of Bram Fischer (Jacana) won the Alan Paton Award.