Nadine Gordimer: The Artist as *A Sport of Nature*[1]

Barbara Temple-Thurston
Pacific Lutheran University

Nadine Gordimer, South Africa's most renowned fiction writer and recipient of many international awards, published her ninth novel in 1987. While all her fiction and her non-fiction comment profoundly on the psychological, political, and historical impact of apartheid on South Africa's people and society, her most recent novel, *A Sport of Nature*, is the most historically and geographically panoramic of all her works.[2] Gordimer's astute and reflexive historical consciousness, by now a fact well-established through Stephen Clingman's seminal work, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, and through Gordimer's own non-fictional commentaries, is most clearly evident in this recent novel.

A Sport of Nature demands a reader who acknowledges Gordimer's acute consciousness of the processes of history. Confusion over the novel has resulted from a failure to read the text in terms of the dialectic between the personal, the political, and the historical. Grounding one's reading in the new historicist approach allows the reader to recognize Gordimer's call for the emergence of a new artistic consiousness that shapes, yet in turn is shaped by, historical conditions—a consciousness that posits a new post-apartheid art.

New historicism, as Louis Montrose sees it, is "*new* in its refusal of unproblematized distinctions between 'literature' and 'history,' between 'text' and 'context'; new in resisting a prevalent tendency to posit and privilege a u: ified and autonomous individual—whether an Author or a Work—to be set against a social or literary background" (6). The intertextuality of *A Sport of Nature* embodies this view through its incorporation of historical figures like Mandela, Nkomo, Luthuli, through movements like the African National Congress, and through cameo appearances of characters like Rosa Burger from Gordimer's earlier fiction.

Montrose declares also that new historicism is succinctly characterized "on the one hand, by its acknowledgment of the *historicity of texts*: the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing [or reporting] . . . and, on the other hand, by its acknowledgment of the *textuality of history*: the unavailability of a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, that has not already been mediated by the surviving texts of the society in question—those 'documents' that historians construe in their own texts, called 'histories,' histories that necessarily but always incompletely construct the 'History' to which they offer access." Again, *A Sport of Nature* reflects this view of history. The text is structured as a kind of biography whose narrator ostensibly sets out to recover the "true" Hillela (the white female protagonist). This recovery of "truth" is deliberately subverted by the text's biographic frame, for the accounts obtained of Hillela are contradictory and incomplete; accounts clearly colored by each reporter's own ideology and place in time. The structure frustrates the reader's attempt to "know" Hillela, for as the narrator notes: "Everyone is familiar with memories others claim to have about oneself that have nothing to do with oneself. In the lives of the greatest—there are such lacunae—Christ and Shakespeare disappear from and then appear in the chronicles that documentation and human memory provide" (100).

This new historicist view of the world proves particularly suitable to Gordimer because of her specific place in space and time, namely the rise and fall of apartheid South Africa, and because of the nature of her craft. When chronologically arranging her *Selected Stories* in the seventies, she became aware that history had acted upon her. She writes in the introduction: "The chronological order turns out to be an historical one. The change in social attitudes unconsciously reflected in the stories represents both that of the people in my society—that is to say, history—and my apprehension of it; in the writing, I am acting upon my society and in the manner of my apprehension, all the time history is acting upon me" (13). Or, as Montrose puts it, "to speak, then, of the social production of 'literature' or of any particular text is to signify not only that it is socially produced but also that it is socially productive—that it is the product of work and that it performs work in the process of being written, enacted, or read" (8–9).

Read through a frame of new historicism then, *A Sport of Nature* can be seen as Gordimer's personal and artistic refusal to submit to

the logic of oppositional forces in South African history today, and as her attempt to shift art—via fiction and the imagination—beyond the colonizing bounds of contemporary history and into the future, thereby changing the focus from the morbid present to the creative possibilities of a post-apartheid South Africa.[3] "Fiction," she has said, "is a way of exploring possibilities present but undreamt of in the living of a single life" (EG 2). What makes this a complex and rewarding reading, however, is the overarching irony of Gordimer's consciousness. While she realizes that her urge to persuade artists to break out of the bounds of history into a creative and imaginative future is nevertheless driven by historical circumstance, she remains resolute in her commitment to act upon history's course herself.

In her statements made in December 1981 after publication of her previous novel, *July's People* and at a time when her ideas for *A Sport of Nature* must have been germinating, Gordimer described the nature of contemporary South African art as "didactic, apocalyptic, self-pitying, self-accusatory." She asserted that the South African artist should seek to escape the shackles of the nightmarish historical moment and should posit a post-apartheid art: "When we posit a post-apartheid art—and we must right *now*—then we switch off the awful dynamism of disintegration and disaster" (A for F iv). *A Sport of Nature* is Gordimer's fictional call to this duty.

Through her realistic observation on the one hand, and the metaphorical presentation of her characters (particularly Hillela, who can be read as the artist figure) on the other, Gordimer re-enacts the process of history as it shapes the consciousness of the individuals, the society, and the artist. By demonstrating the obsolescence of established categories of resistance (white liberalism and black consciousness for example) she validates her summons—via the fairytale love story and its happy ending—of the creative powers of the community of South African artists to seek a new way towards an integration of the fragmented consciousness of present day South Africa.[4] In the introduction to *The Essential Gesture* Clingman states of Gordimer's artistic evolution: "Beyond division and dichotomy hers is a quest for wholeness, the vision of which imaginative writing can offer, and which remains a political ideal" (8). She intends through her art to provoke a new kind of literature that will stake her place as a white artist in "a real indigenous culture of the future by claiming that place in the implicit nature of the artist as an agent of change" (Gordimer, A for F v).

The metaphorical reading of the text is not intended to diminish nor negate the realism of the details of South African life; rather, metaphor and realism work in a dialectical tension, enriching and elucidating such a reading, demonstrating afresh how the personal, political and artistic resonate in Gordimer's fiction. In *A Sport of Nature* this resonance is established by the temporal frame of the novel. The frame is set by the life adventures of the enigmatic white female protagonist, Hillela Capran (the personal). We should note that it spans not only the full period of the Nationalist government's apartheid regime (history/politics), but that it coincides also with the entire period of Gordimer's novel publishing career (art). It stretches from the late forties to the present, and then explodes into the imaginary future.

To map the subtle shifts between the realistic and metaphorical modes, as well as the interaction among the personal, the historical, and the artistic levels, I turn now to Gordimer's unusual protagonist, Hillela Capran. Hillela has posed real problems for conventional readers of the text. She seems touched by little; she is easy, adaptable, with a sensuality and amorality that puzzle and even threaten many readers (she is referred to by reviewers as "slippery," a "malleable waif," an "engaging opportunist," and an "innocent").[5] But the confusion is deliberate, for as mentioned before the structural frame of the pseudo-biography resists "knowing" or "fixing" Hillela. No sooner do we judge Hillela than we realize we have allied ourselves with a less than admirable character in the text: hypocritical Pauline, sexist Arnold, the pretentious English couple, or bitter Brad. Yet while the text evades a "rational" moral judgement of Hillela, it urges us—via scenes such as those of genuine sensual love—to feel Hillela's engaging energy. The reader who withstands the temptation to judgement, and accepts the ambiguities, comes closer to comprehending the dynamic of creative energy which will spur movement towards a post-apartheid art.

Critics like Richard Peck and Rowland Smith, who have spent much time on the to and fro of Hillela, are caught in the trap of a positive or negative judgement.[6] Unable to respond to the attraction of her uniqueness, they are closed to her metaphorical possibilities. Unlike these critics, my concern begins with her energy, which clearly dominates the world of the text. Just as Hillela is a character in the text called a novel, so is the artist a character in the text called history. If we follow the metaphor set up by this reading we can unlock the real

significance of Hillela who, like all good fiction, ceases to be merely entertaining. Clues to her metaphorical dimension are clear from her name changes through the novel: Kim is rejected, as is the colonial past; Hillela is assumed while, like Rabbi Hillel who was president of the Sanhedrin at the time of Christ, she searches for a place and an identity; the African Chiemeka is granted by her general when she finds a stable home in Africa.[7]

Looking then at Hillela as a metaphor for the white artist in South Africa, or rather at Gordimer herself (for she has said, "I have to offer you myself as my most closely observed specimen" [EG 264]), we witness the action of history on both Hillela and Gordimer. Like Gordimer's consciousness, Hillela's is transformed rather late in life. Both experience what Clingman calls in Gordimer's case " a series of transgressions, an overstepping of successive boundaries" (EG 4). In Gordimer's case the first transgression was reading, the second was writing. In Hillela's case the first was breaking the color bar (her friendship with the "coloured" youth), the second was incest (she sleeps with her cousin Sasha). It is these activities, which send them "falling through the surface of South African life" (Gordimer, EG 26), that shift both Gordimer and Hillela beyond the boundaries of traditional white South African culture. This fall grants them both outsider status, essential for the transformation of their consciousnesses. From this moment on, both begin an inexorable move towards a black perspective. Hillela's move is predicted early by signs such as her curly black hair which like some Africans she straightened at one time (7), her affectionate naturalness with servants, Jethro (6) and Betty (29), her partying in the "coloured" townships of Pageview and Fordsburg (53), and ironically her exposure to black opinions through her liberal aunt Pauline. In Gordimer's case the shift in her ideological consiousness as history acts upon her is carefully documented by Clingman in *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*. It is upon his schema that I rely.

In her first three novels, published in the fifties during a time of great hope for liberals, Clingman traces an ideology of human liberalism, echoed in Hillela's life when she valorizes personal and family relationships during her marriage to Whaila. Gordimer's next two novels, written in the sixties in a time of shocking repression and violence, reflect a disillusion with humanism and an acknowledgment that reform must be replaced with revolution. *A Guest of Honour* reflects also a recognition of the significance of the future of

independent Africa. Parallelling this shift we find Hillela acknowledging, after Whaila's assassination, that personal love "can't be got away with," it isn't enough. "The only love that counts is owed to them" (232). From this point on Hillela too focuses her energy on furthering the cause of revolution, and her physical presence in a black independent country echoes Gordimer's recognition of an Africa united in its struggle against racism.

The Conservationist (1974) is a novel of prophecy predicting with certainty the historical transfer of power from white to black at a time of a rising Black Consciousness movement and the crumbling of Mozambique and Angola, while *Burger's Daughter* (1979) examines the possible revolutionary role for committed Whites alienated from all segments of the society. Hillela too is convinced and determined that revolution will prevail, and she fulfills her role of support for black leaders of the revolution. Mongane Wally Serote's view that "blacks must learn to talk, whites must listen" (EG 267) is endorsed by Gordimer. The white writer, she says, "has to find a way to reconcile the irreconcilable within himself, establish a relation to the culture of a new kind of posited community, non-racial but conceived with and led by blacks" (EG 278). Yet Gordimer admits too that as an artist she is "determined to find my place in 'history' while still referring as a writer to the values that are beyond history. I shall never give them up" (EG 278). Gordimer's depiction of Hillela's marriages first to Whaila, then to the General, reflects her conviction that the artist should align with the revolutionary political forces in Africa and endorses her view that the artist's values and vision have a significant role to play.

Any consideration of how the artist communicates these values must lead to the question of language. Gordimer's previous novel, *July's People*, explored the breakdown of communication between Black and White; languages separated the races. In *A Sport of Nature* Gordimer seeks a language that can restore communication, and the language she relies on is metaphorical language. Daniel Schwarz's discussion of "metaphoricity" is helpful at this point. He shows that artistic or metaphorical language has long been valorized by philosophers such as Nietzsche who is, in turn, quoted by Derrida:

> Logic is only slavery within the bounds of language. Language has within it, however, an illogical element, the metaphor. Its principle force brings about an identification of the non-identical;

> it is thus an operation of the imagination. It is on this that the existence of concepts, forms, etc. rests.

Schwarz notes that metaphor is by definition "synchronic and knows no boundaries . . . for metaphor brings into existence something that is absent simply by declaring its presence" (14). The artist, operating imaginatively, uses metaphorical language, a language shared by all artists regardless of nationality or race, and one in which we as readers can all share. Like the artist, Hillela has her own language, a universal one, the language of the body. Metaphorically speaking then, this language of the body (the source of physical creativity) evokes the imagination as the artist's fertile creative source and validates the artist as a generator of ideas about the future.

Metaphorical language, escaping the logic of time and space, is the language of utopian ideas. As Sasha (Hillela's cousin and the only white character who understands her) says when speaking of South Africa's problems: "Instinct is utopian. Emotion is utopian. . . . It's all got to come down, mother. Without Utopia—the idea of utopia—there's a failure of the imagination—and that's a failure to know how to go on living. It will take another kind of being to stay on, here. A new white person. Not us. The chance is a wild chance—like falling in love" (187). Sasha, like Gordimer, recognizes that the resolution for Whites and for white artists in the future of South Africa is extremely precarious; it is "a sport of nature."

Gordimer's stress on "a sport of nature," its focus as the title of the text, forces us to examine its significance thus drawing us to the most sobering aspect of the novel. While Hillela has secured her place in the African future, it is because she is that rare being, a "sport of nature." Gordimer's borrowing of this term from South African writer Sarah Gertrude Millin is deliberately ironic. Preaching racial purity in the early 1900s, Millin asserted that those who deny having "colour consciousness are, biologically speaking, sports." She claimed color consciousness is a "profound feeling (call it instinct or call it acquired prejudice)" that can only be overcome by another biological force, such as sexual desire (Coetzee 153). Hillela's color consciousness, however, delights in difference and combines with her sensual nature to brand her a "sport of nature." Ironically, then, Gordimer inverts the negative value to become a desirable value, for Hillela is the only White in the novel who can adapt, mutate so to speak, and therefore find a place in Africa. For Gordimer, the artist, to find her place, she

too must become a sport. *A Sport of Nature* is evidence of her mutation, as well as her call for South Africa, the country trapped in history, to begin its mutation also.

It is clear that through the metaphor of the sport of nature the text subverts any delusions of an easy and smooth resolution. For example, the Whites who survive and profit from the struggle are Olga's two sons, the international banker and the wine connoisseur. Hillela's black president husband must deal with the realities of neo-colonialism and multinational corporations. Hillela's black daughter, named after Mrs. Mandela, is co-opted by western commercialism to model for the covers of glossy magazines. The Whites who did care and have paid a price, Sasha, his father, and his mother, are the ones who are absent when liberation finally comes. Yet it is Sasha who notes that "utopia is unattainable; without aiming for it—taking a chance!—you can never hope even to fall far short of it" (187). Any personal, political, or artistic resolution of fragmented South Africa remains very elusive.

We can read Gordimer's imaging of a future South Africa as a committed attempt to pursue, not to answer, the artist's need to make whole the disintegrated consciousness that the policy of apartheid in South Africa causes. It is an apprenticeship, a tentative step towards a healing, a vision of wholeness, a "true" consciousness. It can—along with other visions—nudge history out of its rational rut and along the imaginative path of the artist, a path (bypassing the trap of traditional formulas and predictable dichotomies) along which may come "that 'guest of the future'—the artist as prophet of the resolution of divided cultures" (Gordimer, A for F v).

Notes

1. This article was completed at the 1989 NEH Summer Seminar on the African Novel directed by Professor Bernth Lindfors at the University of Texas.

2. All references to *A Sport of Nature* will be parenthetically cited and will be drawn from the 1987 Knopf edition of the text. Abbreviations of other Gordimer texts cited are A for F ("Apprentices for Freedom," *New Society* Dec 1981) and EG (*The Essential Gesture* Knopf 1987 ed. Clingman).

3. J. M. Coetzee discusses the colonizing effects of history on South African literature in "The Novel Today," and Njabulo Ndebele discusses the dangers of being trapped historically in the mode of protest art in "New Directions in South African Literature."

4. The following plot summary emphasizes the fairy tale aspect of the novel: white girl meets black boy; they fall in love, get married and live happily ever after (solving in the process all South Africa's problems!). Gordimer's use of the fairy tale mode is deliberate, and signals the need to read the text metaphorically. It calls too for an imaginative and creative approach to South African literature, emphasizing the ability of the artist to shape the consciousness of the society. The novel follows the life adventures and coming of age of protagonist Hillela Capran. She is a young white teenager deserted by her mother for a Portuguese lover at the age of four. After being expelled from her Rhodesian boarding school for befriending a "coloured" youth, she is abandoned by her ineffectual father to the care in Johannesburg of her two upper middle-class Jewish aunts (one rich materialist, the other a liberal). When she is caught sleeping with her cousin, Sasha, she must leave the sanctuary of her liberal aunt's home and move on through a series of adventures: she works at a number of odd jobs, and explores various relationships—one of which leads her to flee with a phony white activist into independent Tanzania. Abandoned by him she is "rescued" by South African revolutionaries working in exile, a fate which propels her—after a few convolutions—into marriage and a child with a black South African revolutionary organizer, Whaila Kgomani. After the perfect "rainbow" marriage is shattered by his brutal assassination, Hillela learns the need for commitment to the liberation cause for which she works untiringly from then on. As a result of her work she meets and almost marries a white American, Brad, whom she passes up finally for marriage instead to a black African general, soon to be successful president of an unspecified independent African country. He ultimately becomes president of the O. A. U. and he and his white South African wife preside happily over the ceremonies celebrating the successful liberation from apartheid South Africa.

5. Reviews such as those by Jennifer Kraus, "Activism 101" *The New Republic* (May 18, 1987), and Maureen Howard, "The Rise of Hillela, the Fall of South Africa" *New York Times Book Review* (May 3, 1987), indicate the widely differing responses from critics and reviewers to both the protagonist and to the novel as a whole.

6. See Rowland Smith's article "Leisure Law and Loathing: Matrons, Mistresses, Mothers in the Fiction of Nadine Gordimer and Jillian Becker," and Richard Peck's article "What's a Poor White to Do? White South African Options in *A Sport of Nature*."

7. Judith Thurman in her review of *A Sport of Nature* in the *New Yorker* explains the origins of the name Hillela (June 29, 1987).

> It leads to that Rabbi Hillel who was the president of the Sanhedrin at the time of Christ, when the Jews were facing dispersion and struggling to preserve their identity under the Romans. "If I act not for myself," Hillel asked, "who shall act for me? And if I act for myself alone, what then am I? And if not now, when?" Hillel's statement can be read, I believe, as a statement of Gordimer's view of her own position as a white South African artist today.

Works Cited

Clingman, Stephen. *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*. New York: Unwin Hyman, 1986.

Coetzee, J. M. *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988.

Gordimer, Nadine. "The Arts in Adversity: Apprentices for Freedom." *New Society* (Dec. 1981): ii–v.

Gordimer, Nadine. *The Essential Gesture*. Ed. Stephen Clingman. New York: Knopf, 1988.

Gordimer, Nadine. Introduction. *Selected Stories*. New York: Viking, 1976.

Gordimer, Nadine. *A Sport of Nature*. New York: Knopf, 1987.

Montrose, Louis. "Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History." *English Literary Renaissance* 16.1 (1986): 5–12.

Schwarz, Daniel. *Reading Joyce's "Ulysses"*. New York: St. Martin's, 1987.