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Nadine Gordimer's Appropriation of her African Mother Voice

I propose to “revisit” *The Conservationist*¹² in order to analyse Nadine Gordimer’s appropriation of Black South African culture and to look into the way she makes Zulu culture her “mother’s voice.” I undertake to shed a new light on the textual construction of her sixth novel which endeavours to suggest that the South African land belongs also to the Blacks, which opposes the idea of the virginity of that land, a white myth construction. The persistent endeavour of the apartheid regime was to defend such an interpretation and vision of history, through texts and monuments. The statue of John Ross in the port of Durban is a meaningful symbol of that strategy, which ignores John Ross’s historical documents which speak of the Zulu and Chaka.¹³ The purpose of this paper is to analyse the way the textual structure tackles the whole question of the relations between Blacks and Whites via vital issues such as land and culture. I shall show how the novelist deconstructs the Apartheid system by incorporating Zulu mythology in her fiction. I will focus on the way the novelist integrates Zulu mythology as collected by the Reverend Henry Callaway in *The Religious System of the Amazulu* into the textual narration of Mehring’s story. The intertextual interplay, between the source text (the Zulu one) and Gordimer’s text, underlines the appropriation of Zulu heritage by the novelist, transposing *The Conservationist* into a pioneer novel in the South African literary context. Even though studied by many critics including Dominic Head or Liliane Louvel, the way the Zulu text influences Nadine Gordimer’s very text has not been tackled. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate how *The Conservationist* calls for a multi-racial South African land through a mother’s voice for all, that is Zulu culture.

With *The Conservationist* Nadine Gordimer breaks with her earlier novels where female characters played major roles, by having this time a male as a main protagonist, Mehring, who is portrayed

¹² Nadine Gordimer, *The Conservationist*, London: Penguin 1978. (All further references are to this edition).

¹³ The story of John Ross is portrayed by the novelist Stephen Gray who tells of a country belonging to Zulu people, to Chaka who adopted John Ross as a son for a period of four years. The novel is based on historical accounts and letters written by John Ross himself (Gray, *John Ross: The True Story*, 1987).

with an astounding veracity. An exploration of the psychology of a white South African male, a rich industrialist and landowner facing the contradictions existing between his social and private life, between the official conventions and his private feelings, is undertaken. Mehring develops into a convincing character with his doubts, guilts, strengths and weaknesses. His social and professional situations had to be a male's background as the reality of the time was not favourable for businesswomen landowners. White women were confined to the roles of mothers, housewives, lovers, in a word bourgeois women concerned solely by their domestic and private affairs. Creating a male character was inevitable in the South African context of the time, as Nadine Gordimer explains:

It simply wouldn't be possible to have a woman portray the kind of businessman that Mehring is. So the story occurs to me as the story of a man. There is no ambivalence in my attitude, no moment of indecision at all whether this is a story about a man or a woman. The story occurs to me simply in the way that it has to be. (Gordimer: 1990 202)

Mehring serves without doubt Nadine Gordimer's purpose: deconstructing at once the power of males and the power of apartheid. Indeed, the story is that of white power, deconstructed through the key figure of the tycoon Mehring whose life is described through his relation / non-relation with his family, his son Terry, his ex-wife, his mistress, and through his Black farm workers, including his servant Jacobus who grows into a major character too. The implied reader enters this businessman, landowner and traveller's world. It is through his sexual life that Nadine Gordimer best discloses his real self, his true social and ideological attitude. Fully satisfied sexually because of his powerful position as a White boss and thanks to the money he gets without real effort. The story shows that despite his advantages, he is deep down a frustrated man, aware of the fragility of his world. The possession of his farm is presented as an "unnatural" ownership as he is not a real farmer but a city businessman who benefited from laws made to enable the Whites to occupy more land. A political racially oriented decision, giving the possibility to "many well-off city men to buy farms," (22) with a reassurance: if they are bad farmers, "the losses are deductible from income tax." (22) Mehring indulges himself with this land and the relation of domina-

tion / pleasure / shame connected to his sexual life. The whole story speaks for his social behaviour as a colonial white man to whom everything is within reach.

Land being a central issue in people's lives, a heritage some wish to keep and others wish to recuperate. Mehring belongs to those white South Africans who have integrated the idea that their South African history is based on the virginity of the territory when their ancestors first set foot in South Africa. Nadine Gordimer's novel deconstructs such an apartheid interpretation of history by giving voice to the Zulus, consequently deconstructing Mehring's story. Her narrating strategy places in the centre what is apparently on the margin. The sad event which opens and closes the diegesis, that is the discovery of a "dead man *found by Solomon*" (12) on Mehring's property becomes a major issue at the close of the novel. This incident triggers the question of land because Mehring does not want "the intruder" (13) to be left on his farm which is not as he says "a public cemetery." (27) The police is not eager to investigate quickly because the corpse is just another murdered "Kaffir." (18) The dead corpse is left on the spot for days. When they arrive at last they: "ask for a spade ... dig and put him in down there where he was." (27) The murdered Black man without a grave becomes highly symbolic of the question of the land as his story hangs over the novel, like a mystery to be solved, symbolic for the roving of the Black community which does not own any land. The corpse symbolises not only the black community of Mehring's farm but the whole Black community in the Townships. Unknown, the corpse cannot have a proper burial because he is Black and does not belong to the farm. The nameless Black corpse, a mere incident opening Mehring's story, a background in the diegesis, reappears after the flooding of the farm, at the close of the novel. Henceforth, the land is given an important role. It imposes itself as being a crucial issue, not only for the living who benefit from it or who survive on it, but also for the dead.

The legal relations between societal groups and the land are without doubt questioned, in a subtle way, amid what seems important, Mehring's story. The textual construction of the novel addresses a key issue, not only for Mehring who takes it for granted, but for the Black farm workers who realise that one of their own cannot have a

proper grave. By opening and closing the novel with the story of the dead man, Nadine Gordimer gives voice to this silent dead character through a powerful final scene, in which his Black brothers and sisters, the Black farm workers as well as the Indians, succeed in giving him a decent burial, a coffin and a piece of land to rest in peace. With a remarkable economy of words, Nadine Gordimer creates a special atmosphere of dignity and respect in favour of the Black community:

There was a moment of absolute silence when everyone was still, perhaps there was no need of speech, no one knew what to say, and then the one with the staff began to declaim and harangue, sometimes lifting a foot in the air as if to climb some invisible step, waving his staff ... Phineas's wife's face was at peace, there was no burden of spirits on her shoulders as she watched Witbooi, Izak, Solomon and Jacobus sink the decent wooden box, and her husband shovel the heavy spatter of soil, soft and thick ... The one whom the farm received had no name. He had no family but their women wept a little for him. There was no child of his present but their children were there to live after him. They had put him away to rest, at last; he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them. (267)

The last line of the novel gives significance to the ownership of the land, a warning which implies that the land should be shared as it also belongs to the Blacks who suffer from being used for the sole convenience of the Whites. In literary terms, this sub-story takes over Mehrings', portrayed as a living symbol of an illegitimate owner of the land given to him for political reasons.

Beyond this sub-story, Nadine Gordimer goes further in her textual strategy by constructing a metaphor for the re-appropriation of the land by the Blacks through the insertion of Zulu culture in her text which contradicts the White South African critic Malvern Van Wyk Smith who wrote in 1996, in *White Writing/Writing Black: the Anxiety of Non-Influence* that: "There is hardly any evidence of Afrikaans-English intertextuality, let alone of African-Western" (Van Wyk Smith 74-75) in South African literature. Indeed, Nadine Gordimer innovates in the form and in the content as ten excerpts from Reverend Henry Callaway's collection *The Religious System of*

the Amazulu are inserted in italics between groups of chapters.¹⁴ Gordimer goes back to 1870 when Henry Callaway collected Zulu oral stories which try to explain the world. These stories from Zulu culture take their source in the Unkulinkulu or the tradition of creation as existing among the Amazulu, the Amatongo or ancestors' worship, the diviners and Abatakati or medical magic and witchcraft.¹⁵ The excerpts selected by Nadine Gordimer, are separate parts, placed as comments or quotations which enrich and provide meaning to the diegesis. They even suggest interpretative directions, historical explanations through myths. A careful reading of Gordimer's text reveals that the insertion of these myths between the chapters, done through five leading ideas, contradicts or influences the course of the Gordimer's own story, enlightening the text or deconstructing Mehring's story. Nadine Gordimer's appropriation of Zulu heritage plays on intertextuality by intermingling in one volume her text and the extracts from Zulu culture. The Zulu excerpts become a subtext. The novelist integrates Zulu mythology into Mehring's story, and the mixture of the two claims for a heritage to be shared by both the Blacks and the Whites. We have here an articulation of texts which enlighten each other in Julia Kristeva's idea of intertextuality. Gordimer's text tells two stories with two different views of the world, that of Mehring and that of the Black workers. In between, Callaway's text interferes, so how do these texts address one another as they are closely related. The relation between the Zulu subtext and Gordimer's text works on the basis of contradictory or complementary patterns.

The first two excerpts refer to an Unkulunkulu ancestor who prays for corn to be generous, so for wealth to pour down on the village full of children, these being a real human wealth for the future. The ancestor's voice wishes the population to multiply "and that *the* name may never come to an end." (61) By including the Zulu prayer in her novel Nadine Gordimer acts in that direction which is giving voice, life and hope to Black people. In fact, her text contradicts the ancestor's wish, by showing that today's Black children are poor. The "bare soles *and* backsides," (10) of Black children around fresh-

¹⁴ Reverend Callaway, Henry, *The Religious System of the Amazulu*, Springvale Natal, 1870, (reduced to HTML by Christopher M. Weimer, Sacred Texts, March 2003)

¹⁵ In Callaway's book, there are only the answers of the natives. Callaway's questions do not appear. In note to the hypertext transcription by Christopher M. Weimer (ibid.).

ly laid eggs on Mehring's land stress their poverty and desolation. Despite their hunger they stare at the eggs because they "are not allowed to touch *them*." (9) Mehring prefers to save the natural environment of South Africa, an absurd situation because the Black children often starve. The lack of communication between Mehring and the children is emphasized by the fact that the children "don't understand *his* language." (10) The anonymity of the Blacks and their extreme poverty in a land of wealth is enhanced by the Zulu text. The present situation contradicts the ancestors' hopes for their following generation.

The third, fourth and fifth extracts tell of a dream in which a young man goes to fetch "an antelope caught in a Euphorbia tree" (83) by the river. But the young man's brother, Umankamane who follows him, throws a stone on an aloe, just when he is about to lay hold on the antelope. Frightened, they go back home and from that day nothing ever happened. A strange dream in which Umankamane saves in fact his brother from danger. This dream inspires Nadine Gordimer to create her own text. It works as a pretext to Nadine Gordimer's character Solomon. He experiences a strange night when he is called to save his brother caught by the police but falls into a trap and pays for his brother who cannot reimburse the money he owes, a recurrent problem in the townships. The Zulu dream becomes a paradigm and works like a legend. Helping each other to survive difficult moments becomes a necessity. Besides, Solomon's people create a legend out of a criminal situation: "Before Solomon recovered sufficiently to tell his story the legend had already grown that he was attacked in the night by a spirit." (92) The subtext implies that in order to survive the difficulties, legends have always been created among the Zulu. Their strength lies in their capacity to dream, to imagine, to create legends in order to survive.

The sixth and seventh excerpts refer to the origins, a way to regain pride: the Amatongo, part of the Zulu people are the natives "buried beneath the earth," (163) their earth, a theme which connects to Gordimer's dead corpse without a piece of land to be buried in. In these Zulu excerpts, a reference to Hades and Tartarus is done, denouncing the uncomfortable situation of rulers and slaves, bosses and workers. The text hammers that the Amatongo have always been on this land as the Amatongo are the "spirits of buried ancestors that can

influence the living” (Head 101). The historical myth tells that after the arrival of the Whites, the Blacks heard that the Amatongo were not at the origin of the world, but the Christian “God” (192) was.

The eighth extract explains how the Blacks possessed everything and nothing at the same time: “they came out first” (212). The text says that they did not have to prove that they belong to this land. The first Whites who “waited for all things,” (212) possessed everything down to their descent, Mehring and De Beer who have “papers” to prove that they own the land. In Gordimer’s text, Solomon’s dream shows how the psyche of Black people always refers to the ancestors who owned this land naturally, without any proof, without any paper. In Solomon’s dream which confirms the Zulu history, a woman intervenes and refers to her own dreams, creating a chain of remembrance, a mother’s voice, which stresses the idea that the Zulu belong to and own this land:

She was after those dreams of hers, rambling, pursuing, speaking of leopards and chameleons – creatures the children in the doorway had never seen – speaking of snakes she had dreamt she was going to turn into, Umthlwazi, Ubulube, Inwakwa, Umzingandhlu; of imamba and inyandezelu, the snakes that are men and if killed will come to life again; speaking of the spirits, amatongo; describing how she had seen the ugly and rough-skinned lizard that is itongo of an old woman, and how in her sleep there were also elephants and hyenas and lions and full rivers, all coming near to kill her, how they followed her, how there was not a single place in the whole country that she did not know because she went over it all, farther than Johannesburg and Durban, all by night, in her sleep. (165-66)

The dream refers to the Zulu as nomads and the allegory underlines the legitimacy of the Blacks to live decently on the land of South Africa, which would not be the case of Mehring who is told by his mistress that a paper can be worthless:

The bit of paper you bought yourself from the deeds office isn’t going to be valid for as long as another generation. It’ll be worth about as much as those our grandfathers gave the Blacks when they took the land from them. The Blacks will tear up your bit of paper. No one’ll remember where you’re buried. (177)

Here, Nadine Gordimer warns. The connection of the land with death, with the return to earth becomes a motif, a way to say that life here and now is not everything. This gives meaning to the whole novel, as Mehring also wishes to be buried on his farm: “asleep down there by the river” (177). One has to adjust to the reality of things.

In the ninth excerpt, Zulu gardens are carried away by flood. This last myth / story has a direct impact on Gordimer’s end for her story. *The Conservationist* ends with the flooding of Mehring’s farm, like the Zulu gardens flooded, announcing changes. Thus, the floodings bear symbolic significance, that is tragedy or the fragility of ownership. The plunder and the violence occurring in South Africa are expressed through the Zulu metaphor, which speaks of a flooding covering “the dead body of Umkqaekana with earth.” (230) In Gordimer’s text, apart from Mehring’s distress and loss of profits, the flooding permits the reappearance of the Black corpse, which forces the decent burial following the example of Umkqaekana. Flooding plays a double role, the announcement of tragic events and the re-appropriation of the land, symbolised by Unsondo, an ancestor of ancestors and the ancestor of today’s men, they all come from the Uthlanga: “Yêbo. U mina e ngi uthlanga. (yes, it is I myself who am an uthlanga,)” (247) says metaphorically the unknown corpse. The decent return to the earth makes him an Uthlanga. The motif of the return to the earth is connected to the ANC slogan ‘Mayibuye,’ which means “come back Africa” (Head 102). Nadine Gordimer’s powerful implicit metaphor shows how much conscious she is of what the course of history should be.

Nadine Gordimer’s strategy through *The Conservationist* is without doubt the building of bridges between South African communities. In the South African context of the time, writing about Black African historical heritage was not on the agenda of the Pretoria regime. It was a sensitive point to broach, and the consequence is that this novel, which received the Booker Prize, was banned in South Africa.¹⁶ From the censors’ point of view, the novelist should not have introduced a contradictory reading of history, which disrupt-

¹⁶ *The Conservationist* was censored for ten weeks; this information is published in *Government Gazette*. The author was never informed personally. Nadine Gordimer comments: “Ten weeks in a book’s life are crucial from the point of view of sales.” In *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Sixth Series*, 1984, in *Conversations* (143).

ted the official one through an ambiguous, even ironic title, deliberately linked to the concept of “heritage,” by giving voice to Black African culture which was supposed not to exist.¹⁷ The novel raises a major question, that is what kind of heritage and for what purpose, knowing that a conservationist’s priority is to keep tradition alive when it is favourable to him, as does Mehring, the White conservationist. In parallel to Mehring’s traditional colonial attitude, the novelist uncovers the heritage of the Zulu, through an audacious approach. In this complex novel, Nadine Gordimer’s ideological perception of ‘conservation’ is subversive in its content, but also with a new textual construction, where the narrative voices are blurred, where the reader moves from one point of view to another, without indicated transitions or authorial explanations. The implied reader has to adapt to who is speaking and from which point of view. The heterodiegetic narrator portrays the characters’ thoughts, so the reader must be attentive to the shifts in terms of focalisation, moving from White characters to Black characters, whence the complexity of this harrowing novel. The story moves constantly back and forth, from Mehring’s thoughts to Jacobus’ accounts of the events, from one clan to another, from Whites to Blacks, to Indians. The novel is built on a stream of consciousness technique in which feelings and thoughts are expressed sometimes in turn, sometimes intermingled.¹⁸ The novel becomes indeed a disturbing reading experience as the writer admits:

I decided, to hell with it, I’m not explaining anything! If it’s full of unfamiliar terms and unfamiliar situations, I’m not going to put in any kind of authorial direction. It must carry itself. (Bazin and Seymour 258)

By revisiting this text, I hope I have contributed to consolidate the “rainbow country” through “a mother’s voice,” that of Nadine Gordimer and that of Zulu culture. As Nadine Gordimer reminds the existence of Zulu heritage by bringing its historical culture

¹⁷ For example the regime of Pretoria has forbidden to Winnie Mandela to wear traditional Zulu costumes. See Winnie Mandela, *Part of My Soul Went with Him* (1984).

¹⁸ In an interview with Stephen Gray, Nadine Gordimer refers to writers who inspired her narrative technique, stating that the readers who have some difficulties with *The Conservationist* “have probably not read William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, never mind the *nouvelle vague*.” (Bazin and Seymour 179).

within the South African literary scene, a century after Henry Callaway's collection of Zulu mythology. The Zulu subtext constructs and informs Gordimer's text, by moving the centre, claiming an African heritage and "decolonising the mind," to use Ngugi's expression (Ngugi III). This appropriation of a Zulu heritage within a White text helps to face a reality: the right for the Blacks to own the land and the necessity to recognize them as full citizens. The question of the legacy of the past and the references to traditions, beliefs, explanations of origins are important for the making of the history of a society. So, any cultural heritage bears positive aspects when it takes its source in truth and authenticity by creating favourable bridges between past and future, by building solid psychological grounds in people's minds. The burden of race in South Africa is a cumbersome heritage as the novel shows and one has to struggle in order to build the 'rainbow country' Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu dream of. Through *The Conservationist* Nadine Gordimer sustains the idea that Black African culture is part and parcel of the White South African one. The fundamental idea of her literary work is that Whites and Blacks should blend their cultures, their traditions, to create a common heritage which should liberate the country from apartheid psychology. 1994 proved Nadine Gordimer right and gives to her novel in retrospective, a powerful stand. With *The Conservationist*, intertextuality links her literary writing to her political and moral convictions too, thus having here "three in a bed" as she says (Gordimer: 2000 3). By integrating a confiscated Zulu culture into her white text, she has expressed in a searing way the necessity for the Whites to admit that the Blacks were the first owners of the South African land. For Nadine Gordimer the "Whites *had to* learn to listen."¹⁹ The intermingling of Black and White myths, through their confrontations and inter action, calls for a multi-racial South African land, through the motif of burial, as Mehring is not absent from the last scene, that of the funeral of the unknown corpse.

As a liberal White South African writer, Nadine Gordimer had the bravery to claim her African heritage, to hope for a multi-racial country. In *Where do Whites fit in?*, she writes quite bluntly: "If one will always have to feel White first, and African second, it would be better not to stay on in Africa" (Gordimer: 1988 37) Such a comment

¹⁹ Nadine Gordimer expressed this point of view in 1982 (Coetzee 269).

stresses Nadine Gordimer's conviction that claiming for her mother's voice, that is Zulu culture, through literature, constructs a balanced Black and White South African psyche, a necessity as "African writers *should* work out a new spiritual coherence from the historical disconnection between their African heritage and their modern experience" (Abiola 174).

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²⁰ Maître de Conférences, Université d'Angers (France).